A Fate Unseen: Swarm War (arc 1)

The future is to be lived, not prearranged

-Luke Skywalker

Jacen

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Jacen Solo knew the Galactic Alliance was in trouble, knew that he was probably witnessing its dying breaths. He fought back a groan as his head throbbed despite the Force calming techniques he was using; a familiar din in Senate Chambers made up of the shouts of disgruntled senators echoed like miniature explosions in the background.

A government born during a time of war had been unable to find its footing in peacetime, and the ad hoc way it was rushed together to counteract the Yuuzhan Vong threat eight years ago was now proving to be its downfall. The shattered economy of a galaxy ravaged by incessant war was ill-equipped to handle the needs of trillions of people, and a government stretched too thinly by reconstructing efforts in hundreds of systems was unable to cope with the burgeoning demands placed upon it. The government was teetering on the brink of becoming a failed state, and everyone in the room knew it.

"This is an outrage! My sector was promised aid from the Galactic Alliance four years ago! We have yet to see a single credit or crumb of food since then!

"What happened to the resources in the emergency funds?"

"My planet should have received terraforming equipment last year!"

"I have three million people with no place to go because their planet is still a wreck!"

"Well my planet has six million people starving because the food-aid that was promised by last year's Outer Rim Relief bill never came!"

"Again we're wasting money on Coruscant! That world and its people are dead! Rather than use the credits on a symbol that no longer is, use them on the planets that still have people on them!"

"Order!" The banging of the gavel was barely heard over the shouts of the many irate senators. "Silence! I will have order in the Senate!"

The ruckus died down, but many of the senators present had mutinous expression on their faces. They had every right to be angry. History books may have recorded the Galactic Alliance and their allies as winners of the war, but those books were forgetting a few details.

The galaxy's trading systems and economy had been utterly ruined by the four years of constant warring and the years of instability caused by Yuuzhan Vong agents prior. Throughout the course of their invasion, the Yuuzhan Vong had targeted industrialized worlds and laid them to waste; shattering the backbones of many key systems and disrupting a trade network that had lasted for centuries. Hundreds of other worlds had been damaged, ravaged, and ruined beyond repair This translated into many billions in refugees and those with no place to call home, countless systems that no longer had the ability to feed its own people or support local jobs. Worlds that could still be fixed continued to drain the already strained resources of the government as rehabilitation and restoration projects soared over-budget.

And of course with so many previously-inhabited planets now silent graveyards, the other planets and colonies that had relied on the output and resources of those decimated worlds were suffering as well. To pay for the restoration projects and aid for the refugees, the Galactic Alliance government needed funds. To get those funds, they had to increase the membership dues and taxes on all of the systems that fell under their domain. Which in turn caused more strain and collapse, as worlds were still struggling to return to the lives they had once known.

To make matters worse, these funds were separate from the credits being spent to maintain the military and security of the war-ravaged galaxy. Though the war had ended, the power vacuum meant that smugglers, pirates, and all manner of criminal enterprises quickly sprung up to take advantage of the scattered and often non-existent security forces. Some were simply refugees who had no other means of making income. Others were criminal organizations who saw an opportunity to make fistfuls of credits. Hijacking, the drug trade, hostage-taking, the sharp increase in crime directly corresponded with the beleaguered Galactic Alliance government's failure to fix a very broken galaxy. The crime wave only added to the anti-government sentiment and animosity, and further destabilized sectors that might have been able to recover if it hadn't been for the criminal elements and corruption.
The galactic economy was on the verge of collapse, and there didn't appear to be an easy solution in sight.

"The Office of the Chief of State recognizes the delegation from Bothawui," Cal Omas motioned tiredly. The post-war years had been even crueler to him than the warring period. Permanent, heavy bags

were under his eyes, his face lined with wrinkles and seemed frozen in a resigned and pained expression. Though he still had the aura of a politician, the problems and chaos of the last few years had worn away at his strength until it seemed as if he could barely keep himself standing. "Senator Reh'mwa, you have the floor."

A dark-furred male Bothan rose and inclined his head. "Thank you, Chief of State Omas. Though the people of Bothawui have nothing but the greatest of respect for the Galactic Alliance and the ideals it tries to uphold, recent events have put the agenda of the Galactic Alliance at odds with what the people of Bothawui desires. We have been allies of this government reaching far back into the Rebellion era, have bled and died alongside soldiers and spies of the member-states. So it is with deepest regret that we announce our intention to secede from this great government."

Again, a flurry of alarmed and started cries filled the Senate Chamber, and Cal Omas once again had to yell for quiet.

"Senator Reh'mwa, are you certain that this action is what the people of Bothawui desire?" Cal Omas finally asked when some semblance of order was reached.

"Chief of State, during the Yuuzhan Vong War, we Bothans declared ar'krai against the Yuuzhan Vong. In our culture, that is a decision not made lightly for it calls upon the complete annihilation of a race, ours or theirs. The war ended on terms far from satisfactory to our people, who believe that the Yuuzhan Vong haven't paid enough for the damage they have caused to this galaxy. We have asked this Senate and your High Council many times for permission to carry out our sacred war on our own terms, and have been rebuffed. Every Yuuzhan Vong that lives is an affront to us culturally and morally. We cannot remain a part of a government that will continue to shield those murderers and deny their victims the justice they deserve.

Bothawui knows that membership of the Galactic Alliance is a voluntary matter, and that you will do nothing to enforce our continued membership without becoming hypocrites and tyrants yourselves. As such, we invoke the clause in the Galactic Alliance charter that gives us the right to remove ourselves from the member-states of the Galactic Alliance should a majority of our people wish it. A referendum was held on Bothawui and on all our colonies, and nearly eighty-percent of the Bothans wish to part ways. Please honor their wishes, and the wishes of my government."

Cal Omas' haggard expression was prevalent as he wearily nodded. "Very well. But know that the Yuuzhan Vong are still members of the Galactic Alliance. Any act of aggression against them on the part

of Bothawui from this point on will be considered a declaration of war against the Galactic Alliance as a whole."

"It is understood, Chief of State," Reh'mwa tilted his head. He then gazed about the room. "My fellow senators, I now take my leave for a final time. May the future be brighter than the present."

Parting with a phrase that had become very common as of late, the Bothan senator pocketed a datapad and very calmly left a deathly silent room.

Cal Omas lethargically reached over and activated the voice-amplifier. "We will take a break for lunch. Still on the schedule is the discussion of the relocation efforts regarding the Ithorians, the emergency petition by the Hapes Consortium, and delays surrounding the aid appropriation for the Mid-Rim projects. Please return in another two hours. That is all."

As the Senators and other diplomatic representatives filed out of the room, two figures ducked into a much smaller chamber off to the side. It was the official office for the Jedi Order Representative to the Senate, Jedi Knight Jacen Solo.

After completing his four-years of soul searching and learning about more abstract views of the Force, Jacen had returned to the Order with a much calmer and collected air about him. He quickly took to his duties on the High Council with much more enthusiasm than before; seemingly willing to do any and everything he could to help better all aspects of the Jedi Order. His dedication and advocating of the 'Unifying Force' philosophies earned him a following of Jedi Knights and Masters on many sides of the philosophical spectrum. He had truly developed an aura of leadership and responsibility after his sojourn, acting and sounding like the leader the Jedi Order needed. In fact, there were now whispers that it was Jacen, and not his forgotten younger brother, who would fill the vacant Grandmaster seat that Luke Skywalker had left behind.

With Coruscant slowly being rebuilt, Jacen was now on Denon—the temporary capital of the Galactic Alliance and location of the Galactic Alliance Senate. It was about as opposite of Mon Calamari as possible; with smog congested air, rugged mountain-sides spoiled by extensive city-building, and skies full of traffic of all sorts. It had none of the calm and relaxing aura that Mon Calamari had had, and was thrice as noisy and unpleasant as the worst parts of the ocean planet. In a way the industrial nature of the planet fit the mood that permeated the building. The 'honeymoon' period, the two years after the Yuuzhan

Vong War had ended, had long passed. With the celebrations and memorials complete, it was now up to the living to try and return the galaxy back to some semblance of normalcy.

"That wasn't entirely unexpected," Jacen Solo's apprentice sighed with a rueful shake of her head. Nelani Dinn let her black hair loose from its tight bun, shaking it free as she plopped down in a nearby couch. "I mean, the Senate had plenty of warning beforehand but was too bogged down in procedures and other worries to really address the issue."

"Apart from letting the Bothans attack the Yuuzhan Vong, I doubt Cal Omas would have been able to do much anyways," Jacen remarked, taking a seat at the expensive wooden desk. He pulled out two blumfruit from one of the desk's drawers and tossed one over to Nelani. "These past few years, especially after that Tion Hegemony debacle, he's really lost a lot of power and influence, and the other senators can sense that."

"And he still has one more year left of his term before elections," Nelani said, absently peeling the fruit with delicate usage of the Force. "We're going to lose a few more planets if the delays and setbacks keep dragging on."

"Judging by the mood of things, we'll lose more than a few." Jacen idly patted a memorial bust by his office window—a gift that all senators had been given a month ago to honor those fallen in war. It was sentimental, but also another example of the misplaced priorities of a lame duck government. "The Galactic Alliance was built during wartime, with wartime needs in mind, with the Jedi Order's needs in mind. We were so focused on surviving, on winning the war that we barely had a chance to plan for what happened after. But the tide of gratefulness that the end of the war brought is now fully exhausted, and the shortsightedness of those who built the government is being brought into full view."

"Do you think a no-confidence vote will be taken? Or will the other senators let him finish the rest of his term?"

"Hard to say," Jacen shook his head. "The entire galaxy is frustrated with the lack of progress, but it's not like anyone is eager to step up and take over. There hasn't even been any talk of his successor and the election is next year. It's almost as if we're standing on a tipping point, where we'll soon be forced to choose between chaos and order."

"Sometimes I wonder why the Jedi just can't step in and take control," Nelani tilted her head. "I mean, I know we're dedicated to serving the Force, and not ruling over anyone. But if the entire galaxy benefits from it, why shouldn't a Jedi step up and be the next Chief of State?"

Jacen smiled faintly. "Aside from what happened the last time a Force-user ascended to that position?"
Nelani nodded, her curiosity innocent in nature.
Jacen inclined his head, patiently delving into the intricacies of what happened when the Jedi doctrines clashed with politics. When the will of the Force conflicted with the agendas of those not attuned to it and how it led to the rise of a despotic rule.
It had become almost second-nature for the both of them. She would ask a question, he would answer, and she would ask more questions that would cause him to reevaluate or reaffirm his viewpoints. In that aspect, she reminded him a lot of himself when he had been younger, open to any and everything the teachers could teach him.
He had found Nelani near the end of his 'spiritual journey,' when the Force had taken him to Lorrd. She had been a very shy and caring twelve-year old girl, dirty and cold and living in the streets. Though her parents had hidden her during the war, they hadn't survived themselves. It hadn't taken much for him to convince her to come with him.
Though she was still shy and caring three years later, Nelani eagerly absorbed all that he taught her and was a great student. Not as powerful in the Force as some of the other Jedi, she was a quick learner, picking up both blade and Force techniques almost faster than he had. In her spare time, she completely immersed herself in the doctrines and history of the Jedi—often returning to him and with questions or an odd fact or two about the orders of eras past.
She was the envy of many of the other apprentices, but didn't let her apprenticeship with him go to her head. In fact, if anything, whenever someone mentioned her being paired to him, it seemed to make her even shyer than before.
The doors to the room opened once more, and this time three hooded figures entered.
"Well, I guess that's my cue to exit," Nelani said, standing. "Thanks for letting me sit in this morning's Senate session, Master Solo. It wasn't *quite* as brain-draining as you made it out to be."
"You can always attend the afternoon session too."
"Thanks, but I think I'll pass. I'll be training with Seha at the Jedi Temple if you need me."
"Okay," Jacen gave her a brief salute. "Say hello to her and her friends for me."
Seha Dorvald was another Force-sensitive he had found in his travels, although her age and lack of training—she had been hiding in the undercity of Coruscant when Jacen found her on the last month of his

travels—made the Force a bit harder for her to use than most. Her shyness and insecurity worked against her when it came to learning the Force. But Nelani had become an unofficial 'teacher' of sorts to the younger teen, and the two war orphans had a very close friendship.
"Will do." With one last nod, Nelani slid past the three cloaked figures, and the door closed behind her.
Once she was gone, Jacen stood and stepped around his desk, bowing formally. "Queen Mother."
"Senator Solo." Tenel Ka pushed back her hood and raised an eyebrow.
"We'll be right outside, Your Highness," one of Tenel Ka's twin protectors commented.
"That way he doesn't have to pretend to go through all those formal, respectful things everyone else has to do with you," the other chirped, to the very audible groan of her other half.
Tenel Ka's gray eyes sparkled and she tilted her head in acknowledgement. "Thank you, Taryn, Trista."
"Oh, before you go. I actually asked Zekk to stop by so we could discuss something over lunch," Jacen said casually, stopping them just before they left. "But since I'm currently occupied with the regent of sixty-three systems, I don't think I can keep the meeting. Also, since the Senate session ran over, I wasn't able to inform Zekk otherwise."
"We'll take care of it, Senator Solo." Though the words were said with as little emotion as possible, the delight that spiked out from both twins caused Tenel Ka and Jacen to share a hidden grin.
"You two may have lunch with him if you wish, I shall be safe with Senator Solo," Tenel Ka said regally, mischief underlying her otherwise professional tone.
Setting up Zekk with one or both of the Zel twins at least once a month was an odd, two-year old scheme both Jacen and Tenel Ka had started; much to Zekk's constant embarrassment and disbelief. It was a plot the almost twenty-year old Zel twins were more than happy to take part in.
Taryn and Trista eagerly ducked out of the room, and the doors to the office closed once more. Jacen made a brief gesture to lock it. No sooner had he completed the movement of his hand, than Tenel Ka had stepped forward and wrapped her arm around him.
"Hey." Jacen leaned into the embrace and rubbed her back, concentrating both on her Force presence, but also the life growing within her. She had borne her pregnancy well, only a slight swelling of her stomach to indicate the presence of their child, their daughter. It was still hard for Jacen to believe that he was soon going to be a father.

Both shared a warm smile full of emotion as they parted, eyes shining brightly. Jacen let a single hand caress Tenel Ka's stomach, connecting with the equally strong presence of their daughter–to-be. "Hey Allana. I know it's been a while since we lasted talked. Sorry about that, your father has a very crazy schedule. Be a good girl and don't come out for another couple of days, okay? Your mom still has to get back to Hapes."
Tenel Ka rolled her eyes, placing her single hand atop his own. "I have it timed so that she will arrive the day after my return. If I could slow her growth for several months, then a couple of more days will not be any trouble."
Jacen responded by kissing Tenel Ka gently and embracing her securely; reminded of just how close he had come to losing both his best friend and his daughter six months prior. Tenel Ka had been poisoned during a state function, and though the Queen Mother was more than able to use the Force to fight off the affects, the lethal substance had nearly snuffed out the innocent life growing within. The damage to the developing life had been great, and only a concerted effort to heal the child with the Force, and a delayed pregnancy, had given their daughter any chance of survival. Jacen couldn't remember ever being so frightened in his life, and reminders of that moment still shook him.
Jacen took a step back, a worried look coming over his face as he kept a lingering hand on her cheek. "Not that I'm not happy you're here. But I thought you were going to be on Hapes until you had our daughter? What's the emergency petition Cal Omas mentioned?"
Tenel Ka's expression darkened slightly, taking a step away to turn towards the window. "Trouble with the Corellians."
"You didn't mention anything the last time I was at Hapes."
"It was not so serious the last time you were at Hapes," Tenel Ka replied after a measured beat. "Recently, Corellian ships have begun boarding Hapan vessels, kidnapping the crews, and pressing them into the service of the Corellian Defense Force. They have even become so bold as to begin violating clearly marked boarders, with some of their military ships seen in the Rim Worlds and even firing warning shots at my patrol crafts."
"And what have they said?"
"Standard diplomatic stalling. I've contacted both Jysella and Valin about the issue, and they say that the new Prime Minister is riding the wave of post-war patriotism and is refusing to allow anyone else to tell them where they can and cannot go. They are trying their best, but recommended I take it up with the Senate before things escalate.

Although, after seeing how quickly Cal Omas gave in to the Bothans, I do not have much hope. Corellia has many allies, many with an abundance of credits at their disposal, and he will be too afraid to alienate them all. Add to the fact that Bothawui is a strong ally of Hapes, and I do not believe he will be too sympathetic to us."
"Corellia had always remained separate from the New Republic, it's no surprise if they start going rogue now," Jacen said, a flash of annoyance escaping his tightly controlled countenance. He stepped up behind his lover and wrapped his arms around her, his hands resting gently on her swollen belly. "Look, if the Senate can't help you with this, I'll take your issue directly to the High Council."
"Hapes would appreciate that," Tenel Ka breathed. "The sooner the Corellians can be made to stop their provocations, the quicker the Senate can proceed with more pressing issues."
"Jacen Solo will appreciate that as well," Jacen smiled. "This senator has a vested interest in Hapes and her queen after all."
"Is that so?" Tenel Ka tilted her head back to him and quirked an eyebrow. "And just what is this interest of yours, Senator Solo?"
"Allow me to demonstrate," he whispered, leaning in and kissing her once more. They pulled back at the end, but only just. Jacen very gently caressed her cheek, his brown eyes holding her gaze. "I'll do everything in my power to protect you and our daughter, Tiki. I promise."
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The rest of the Senate meeting went as expected, with Cal Omas promising to 'look into' the Hapan allegations regarding the Corellians, and little else happening. After an entire afternoon and evening of readjusting aid quotas and diverting credits from one project to another amid a multitude of protests, the meeting was finally over.
It was late into the night, a couple hours past the traditional time for dinner, when Jacen once again passed through the doors of the Senate chamber and out into the hallway. He was just about to head to the cafeteria for a late evening meal when he heard someone call his name.
He turned. "Master Hamner?"
"Jacen." The long-time Jedi-turned-politician, flanked by several high ranking officials and important politicians, strode up to him. Despite no longer being on the High Council, Kenth Hamner still had many important political connections that the Order needed. "Thank you. Sorry to keep you from your meal."
"Not a problem. What can I do for you?"
"Actually, can we talk about it in a place that's less open?"

"Sure," Jacen shrugged. He followed the delegation to a nearby meeting room, where everyone took a seat at a round, cold metal table. A single lamp shone from above, casting shadows in over corner of the room and keeping most of the delegations' faces hidden from view. "What's this about?"
"To be blunt, Jacen. What's your opinion of the current Chief of State?" Jacen regarded each member in the room with a careful glance before responding; being in the Senate had taught him to always tailor his words to those he was speaking to. "I take it none of you are here to work on his reelection campaign?"
"We are not," a Mon Calamari admiral admitted. "Cal Omas has bungled too many important issues to be allowed back into office. From the Tion Hegemony, to the delay in relief supplies. The Bothans were the final straw."
"We're trying to gather enough votes for a vote of no confidence in next week's assembly," a Gotal politician added.
"Officers and politicians, I can understand. Where do you come in, Master Hamner?"
"The Jedi Order is as much a part of the Galactic Alliance as everyone else. It's in the Order's best interest to keep the Alliance strong, to ensure that all that we have fought for does not come apart. Cal Omas as the leader is no longer in our best interest, in the galaxy's best interest. You've read the signs, know that he's one bad step away from completely dissolving everything we struggled for."
"And here I thought we Jedi were staying out of the politics."
"This is no laughing matter, Jedi Solo," another politician, Jacen recognized him as Fost Brasmin, Coruscant's symbolic senator, scowled. "Billions of people continue to suffer because Cal Omas is no longer the type of leader we need. At war time, he may have had the wherewithal to keep us together, but in peace time, his strategies no longer work."
"We need a strong leader, someone to inspire the people and bring them back together." The Kuati Senator, Haydnat Treen said resolutely.
"Even Fleet Command is getting fed up with being run about the galaxy chasing after pirates and putting down rebellious refugees," a second Mon Calamari admiral said in agreement.
"It sounds as if all of you have already decided on a replacement then," Jacen said, still uncertain why it took the entire committee to tell him this. Then again, he thought, this *was* the Senate. Nothing could be done without a committee, even ousting the Chief of State.
"Two replacements, actually," Kenth continued to stare at Jacen.

"Me?" Jacen's eyebrows shot up.
"You and Admiral Niathal," Kenth confirmed, motioning to the first Mon Calamari admiral. "It will be a balancing act between what is needed and what is right. Admiral Niathal can handle the responsibilities of the fleets, while you focus on getting the aid out to those who need it."
"Master Hamner…"
"Hear me out, Jacen. Like it or not, you're currently the most popular Jedi in the Order, and popular with the public as well. This galaxy *needs* a leader they can believe in. *Needs* someone they can look to to bring them back from the brink. They won't have to fear a Vader repeat because it will be one of their own in charge of the armed forces. If we don't act now, it might soon be too late to save the Alliance, and who knows what chaos will occur then."
"I am aware that you are in a relationship with the Queen Mother of Hapes," Admiral Niathal said gently. "And that Cal Omas will do nothing about the Corellian aggression. If you were to join me as co-Chief of State, we would be able to put an end to that matter without further fuss."
"If I know Tenel Ka, and I do, she'd have a few words for you, trying to use her like that," Jacen said mildly, raising an eyebrow.
"Of course, my apologies."
"Master Hamner, as badly as this galaxy needs a strong leader, I think putting a Jedi in charge of the Galactic Alliance is a big mistake. I have no doubt that the High Council is unaware of this idea, and I know at least three-quarters of the Jedi on that council would disapprove."
"The Jedi are the ones that helped to create this government!" Hamner said incredulously. "We make up half the High Council and help decide the serious matters! We cannot remain politically neutral when we literally dictate terms to the rest of the galaxy. What good is the High Council if we aren't supporting the very politicians we helped put into power?"
"And that's part of the problem," Jacen interjected sharply. "The Galactic Alliance is not a proxy for the Jedi Order, nor is the Jedi Order supposed to take sides. We must let things take its natural course."
"Even if it means the galaxy goes down in flames? Jacen, your parents helped to *build* this government. Gial Ackbar, Mon Mothma, Crix Madine, and countless other heroes all gave their lives so we can live as we do today. We survived the Empire Reborn, the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium, the Yuuzhan Vong. Are you telling me that after all those sacrifices, sweat, and blood, we are to simply stand aside and watch the galaxy as we know it collapse into dust?"

Jacen took a calming breath. "Master Hamner, admirals, senators. During my travels, I met a Fallanassi Force user who taught me the dangers of trying to manipulate events. If there was one lesson she imparted to me, it is to leave nature alone and accept the galaxy for what it is. Nothing good has ever come of the Jedi meddling in politics. It's necessary at times that we do so, such as when the fate of the entire galaxy hangs in the balance, but it is not what the Jedi are meant to do. My brother tried to do it to save the Order during the Yuuzhan Vong War, but then his plan backfired and he took on the blame meant for an entire government's decision.

Yes the Jedi Order may be a part of the Galactic Alliance, but unlike the other members, we are the only ones who make up half of the High Council. It is an advisory body that often makes monumental decisions that affect the entire galaxy. Yet, you do not see any Hapans, any Imperials, any members of the Tion Hegemony, or Bakurans on that council; only ministers, the Chief of State, and Jedi. The High Council is the one exception, not the rule. The Galactic Alliance and the Jedi Order have an unequal relationship where they need us to remain stable, more than we need them. It was agreed at the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War that the Jedi were not its caretakers.

If it falls, it falls. If the next incarnation that rises from the ashes is dedicated to serving galactic peace, and is capable of doing so, the Jedi will of course support it in a similar fashion. But the Galactic Alliance is simply a means to an end for the Jedi, no more, no less."

The silence was deafening, with half his audience looking awed, and the other half looking disgusted. Kenth Hamner was among the latter group. "Jacen, we can't afford to let the galaxy fall apart because of semantics and pride. The Galactic Alliance is the only thing holding back galaxy-wide anarchy."

"Is it?" Jacen again challenged. "The Corellians and the alliances they have been forming appear to be pretty stable despite the Galactic Alliance's decline. The Bakurans have flourished since the end of the war, their ships patrol parts of former Ssi-ruuvi space all the way to the Corellian Trade Spine. Even the Mandalorians have undergone a renaissance with all the beskar iron the bombardment of their planet had uncovered. At one time, for millennia, the Hutts were the most powerful force in their part of the Outer Rim, but now both the Hapans and Bothans have been slowly absorbing their territory. The Empire, which once spanned this entire galaxy and had the most powerful navy in existence, is a mere flickering flame on the verge of being snuffed out. It's all a part of a natural cycle, Master Hamner. Governments rise and fall, life and death, success and failure. The Jedi are mere

guardians of the peace, tasked with ensuring that this cycle continues in as natural a way as possible."
"And what of the trillions of lives that could be lost or endangered once the Galactic Alliance fractures?" Admiral Niathal spoke up. "What will the Jedi do then when the fleets of the Galactic Alliance are no longer at their disposal? The Jedi are what is holding this government together. They are why the military continues to back Cal Omas and the Senate. People *believe* that the Jedi can make a difference, can change lives for the better. What we have to do is operate on this government and removed the cancerous growth that is Cal Omas. We can still save this government, all those lives, if we only act now. Are you telling me that you've given up on saving this Galactic Alliance?"
"You misunderstand me, Admiral," Jacen said softly. "I don't want the galaxy to burn per se, but the Jedi are part of the current problem. We've become this government's crutch, enabled many of the problems that exist today because so many in the government look to us to make galaxy-altering decisions. A Jedi as Chief of State will be akin to turning this quasi-republic into an outright dictatorship once more, even if you are supposedly the co-Chief of State. The galaxy needs to start relying on their own people, on their own power. *Not* on an order of people whose numbers aren't even five-hundred strong."
"So you won't step up and be the co-Chief of State?"
"No?"
"Will you participate in the vote of no-confidence?"
"I'll vote nay," Jacen held up a hand to halt any comments. "Cal Omas may be unable to cut through the bureaucracy that is holding up aid and alienating allies, but our hands are just as tied. Even if we vote him out of office before the elections, is there any guarantee that another can do where he failed? You said it yourself Master Hamner, the Galactic Alliance was built up by the Jedi, ensuring that our allies were in key positions. If even the man we put in charge of everything can't get things done with a deck stacked on his side, what difference will rushing a candidate into his position make? Cal Omas is not stupid, he knows he won't get re-elected if someone runs against him. Let him set his affairs in order, to try and make it as easy as he can for his successor."
Kenth's lips thinned. "Very well, it is clear you are not going to help. Thank you for your time."
The members filed out of the room. A single figure, body hidden by a cloak, emerged out from its shadows.
"You do not wish to lead, Jacen?"

"Not like that, Vergere," Jacen shook his head, not at all surprised to see her. She had been with him during much of his soul-searching, acting as both teacher and guide, and becoming a bridge between the 'lost' Force sensitive cultures and himself. They hadn't always agreed—such as when he overrode her desire to leave Nelani and Seha behind—but they had developed a true Master-Apprentice relationship in that time. If he didn't know any better, he'd almost say that she'd grown fond of him. "I've learned much on my travels. There are other ways to lead than from a spotlight."

The Fosh, her feathers dull and graying, offered a patient, slow bob of her head in response. "Indeed there are. What are your plans then, Jacen? Will you let the galaxy burn around you?"

"Sometimes a burning is needed to cleanse, to make room for new life. Some seeds only open when exposed to fire after all," Jacen replied evenly. "This government has had its time, and now it will be up to others to step up and take its place. The trillions of lives the admiral mentioned will continue to live on, but without the false hope of Jedi swooping in to rescue them of all their problems. It was a mistake to have the Jedi so involved in government, to turn us into war-heroes and people to be idolized. Sure Uncle Luke might have wanted to avoid another Purge, but now the Jedi Order has become something this entire galaxy is looking to to save the day once more. And we simply don't have the ability to do so. Change needs to happen, and change for the better won't occur if Jedi take over the government."

Vergere took a chair opposite of him, the light above casting shadows. "You have grown much, Jacen Solo. I am proud that you have begun to see things for what they are."

"But it will be a controlled change, a controlled burn. Chaos, discord, the collapse of a government, won't be helpful to anyone. The framework for a new government, one free of Jedi intervention, has to be built first."

"You think of your daughter and her mother," Vergere's eyes narrowed. She had always disapproved of his relationship with Tenel Ka, one of the few arguments that had yet to be resolved.

"I think of *all* my family, Vergere," Jacen replied. "They are all important to me."

"More important than the fate of the galaxy? When the time comes, *would* you be able to choose between trillions of lives and that of the red-haired queen? Choose the galaxy over your twin? In our travels, I taught you, Jacen Solo, to separate your emotions from what is needed, that your empathy is your greatest weakness. Will you let your

personal feelings dictate the course of the galaxy, when logic would suggest a different course of action?"
Jacen raised a single eyebrow at her question. "I'll cross that bridge when I reach it. The Aiing-Tii monks helped me to see that there is no sense worrying about what is to come. What happens will happen, as is the will of the Force. I might have to make that sacrifice, I might not. Until I reach that point in time, the only thing that matters is the present. I have Tenel Ka, my daughter, my brother and sister, my mother and father, my aunt and uncle, and my cousins. Rather than fret about things I can't do anything about, I'll use the present to cherish them while I can. The future is not set in stone, Vergere. You especially taught me that."
"And so I have." Vergere said proudly. The trip had been every bit as rejuvenating for her as it had been for him, with Vergere delighting in just how many unique cultures had survived despite the galactic wars that had torn apart the galaxy. Even then, Jacen didn't miss the slight melancholy vibe she tried to hide from him, as if she had seen too much, knew too much.
"Ever since we returned from my quest to find myself, I've rarely seen you."
"Oh, I've been around. Teaching at the various Force-sensitive-serving academies that exist in this galaxy," Vergere said airily. "You are not so important that I'd fall to tears without your presence."
"I'm glad. I missed you too," Jacen laughed.
Vergere tilted her head. "And I you, Jacen Solo. Am I correct to assume that you need no advice on how to deal with the Jedi Hamner and the others?"
'Jedi' was said with the utmost reluctance, as if Kenth wasn't deserving of the title.
"You'd be right," Jacen nodded. "At one time, I might have agreed to his plan, but not now. Was there something you wanted, or do you just enjoy lurking?"
"Lurking is not a crime, is it?" Vergere said, pretending to be aghast at his words.
"Lurking when I'm pretty sure you don't have security clearance to be in this part of the Senate Building, is," Jacen grinned, standing. "How many guards did you have to mind-trick?"
"Three," Vergere answered glibly, walking around the length of the table to reach his side.
"Vergere," Jacen said, stretching her name out in sing-song.
"Yes?"
"You avoided my original question."

"I did, didn't I?"
"Why are you here now?"
"Just checking up on my apprentice," Vergere hummed. "Times are going to change again, and very soon. Be sure that you are ready for it, Jacen. I've invested much time and patience in you after all."
"Are you warning me about a future?"
"I am warning you about *the* future," Vergere corrected, her voice softening. The doors slid open, and they both emerged into the hallway. "Events are unfolding, gathering speed as they do. Take care to remember the lessons you learned in your travels. And try to remember the silly ramblings of your old teacher as well."
"You're not that old, Vergere," Jacen said fondly.
"Am I not? Rare is it for my kind live beyond seventy. I only just turned eighty-nine yesterday."
"Happy birthday."
"Thank you," Vergere said sarcastically. She sobered quickly though, her mood reaching Jacen as she looked up at him with sharp eyes. "The Force does not appear to be done with me quite yet, but I can feel its calling. I will not be alive when the events are set into motion, that much I am certain. I can only hope that I have prepared you well enough for the events that are to come."
"I've learned much from you, Vergere," Jacen said gently, placing a hand on her shoulder. "A part of who I am is because of your lessons."
"Whether that is good or bad remains to be seen," Vergere snorted. "Maybe you are just as great a fool as I am, learning these nonsensical ramblings of an old woman."
"There isn't much in this galaxy that *does* make sense," Jacen pointed out.
"True," Vergere sighed. "I have told you many times that it is pointless to wish for something that can never be. But now, as I enter the last years of my life, I can only wish for things to be so much different. I needed more time, but time I did not get. I was fortunate enough that the Force guided you to me as quick as it did, though. The galaxy isn't ready for what is to come, any more than it was when I left with the Yuuzhan Vong."
"I thought you left *because* of the Yuuzhan Vong," Jacen raised an eyebrow.
"Jacen Solo, you forget that I cavorted with Force users that were not necessarily followers of the light. I had some inkling of what was to come, even if it had not yet transpired. Do you not think the galaxy would have stood a better chance against the Yuuzhan Vong when it was under Palpatine's rule; united, with planet-destroying weapons,

and in a military state. I left not because the galaxy was unprepared for the Yuuzhan Vong, but because they were unprepared for the consequences such a war would cause. And even then, I could only delay the Yuuzhan Vong for so long. It was not the results, but the actual war that I feared, a war that would stretch across the stars and leave a galaxy in ruins. A war on a scale never before seen or felt in the Force. The war simply did not reach the level required to herald in an age of eternal night."
"Vergere, you're speaking riddles again."
"I am old, I have a right too," Vergere clucked. "And maybe all I am doing is rambling, that my fears are unfounded. Maybe what might come to pass won't do so in your lifetime. If that is the case, I can rejoin the Force more relieved than I have ever been in my whole life."
"It's not like you, to care for the state of the galaxy. Sure the Yuuzhan Vong War left it in ruins, but you never struck me as the type to worry about such things."
"Jacen, Jacen, Jacen," Vergere said , tsking. "It is not the galaxy I worry about, but you. You and the eventual burden you must carry should things come to pass the way as I have foreseen them. The Yuuzhan Vong War was only an interlude to a tale written well before our times. A side-show in a prophecy that has yet to be fulfilled. Balance has yet to be brought to the Force. Your story is far from over, and it saddens me that my time in it is drawing to a close when yours is nearing its zenith. Stay true to yourself, Jacen Solo. No matter what happens in the future, that is what you must do. Only then will the tale that is millennia in the making will end on terms to your liking."
"You're crying," Jacen said softly.
"Yes, yes, perhaps I am," Vergere smiled ruefully. She placed a feathered hand on Jacen's chest. "Live long and rule well, Jacen Solo. I do not think we shall meet again."
"Vergere?"
"Look, your apprentices come to join you," Vergere gestured down the hallway.
Jacen turned to look, seeing Nelani and Seha's shadows round the nearby corner. When he looked back at his side, Vergere was nowhere to be seen.
"Hi Master-who-forgot-again-about-dinner-with-his-lova ble-apprentices!" Nelani called out brightly.
"Politics, what can I say?" Jacen shrugged sheepishly and shoved his hands into the pockets of his Jedi robes. He would worry about Vergere later.

"How about, 'thank you for discovering that the Hapans leave Denon in an hour and have reserved a seat for you on their ship'?" Seha grinned, waving a datapad. The red-haired girl was always less shy and more confident when she was teamed up with Nelani.
"Thank you for discovering that the Hapans leave Denon in an hour and have reserved a seat for me on their ship," Jacen dutifully recited, causing the two teenage girls to giggle. "They have seats for the two of you too?"
"Of course," Nelani said. "Did you really think I was going to miss the birth of my Master's first child?"
"Nelani managed to talk the temple stewards into giving me some leave time," Seha added. Being a non-assigned Jedi Initiate—Jacen was technically not her master—Seha Dorvald lived and honed her abilities within the Denon Jedi Temple; the temple becoming her home and its staff her family. However, between the endless training exercises and good nights' sleep in a warm bed, she was often out with Nelani, and by extension Jacen, whenever they were in town.
"Great," Jacen smiled warmly. "Glad to have you along."
"So, Master," Nelani tilted her head up curiously as they began through walk through the ever-busy streets of Denon's Upper Government Level. "What kept you this time? Didn't the Senate let out, like two hours ago?"
"You remember earlier in my office when we talked about Jedi taking control of the Senate?"
"Uh huh."
"Master Hamner wanted me to team up with Admiral Niathal and become co-Chief of State."
"Really?" Both Nelani and Seha's eyebrows shot up in incredulous disbelief.
"That was my reaction too," Jacen laughed.
"What'd you say?" Nelani asked.
"I turned them down."
"But why?" Seha blinked. "Doesn't this galaxy need someone capable of bringing it back together again? Omas is certainly not doing that."
"Jedi shouldn't be politicians."
"But they are," Seha pressed. "How can Jedi be non-political if they made you a Senator, if they make up half the High Council? If you're in a position to change things, shouldn't you take that step to make things better? Being in a position of power, but not doing anything… isn't apathy the same as letting everyone suffer and die?"
Jacen opened his mouth, and then closed it. For some reasons, the words being said by the young teen sounded a lot more logical than

out of the mouth of a raving Jedi Master desperate to hold together a sinking government, and he couldn't formulate a response right away.
"Jacen told me that whenever a Jedi was in control of the central government, it marked the beginning of an end for the Order," Nelani said slowly, not quite agreeing, but not disagreeing either. "And he's right in some ways, I looked it up. Every time the Jedi became too influential in the central government, the Sith would re-emerge and knock them off their pedestal. I think it's actually the Force balancing things out, keeping the light from becoming too strong. But whatever the reason, the evidence is in the history books."
"But didn't it take two thousand years for the last order to fall?" Seha said. "And they only fell because it was a Sith in charge. Do you really think Jacen's going to wake up one day and arbitrarily decide to be a Sith? A good man in power, someone strong, can do so much good for this galaxy. And the galaxy needs a good man, or woman, to lead it."
"You think I should have agreed with Master Hamner?" Jacen asked curiously.
Seha bit her lower lip, looking sheepish. "Or at least put up another one of the Jedi Masters in your place."
"Go ahead and speak your mind, Seha," Jacen said lightly. "I can tell you're agitated about something."
"Well," Seha looked at her feet shyly. "I kind of think you missed an opportunity."
"An opportunity?"
"The Jedi got in trouble the last time for being passive, almost lost the war," Seha said slowly. "Even if there is no actual war to fight, being passive has never helped the Order in times of peace either."
"The Galactic Alliance…"
"Is a part of the Jedi Order, no matter what we say," Seha pressed, looking up at Jacen with newfound strength. "Or is the High Council just a sham?"
Jacen closed his eyes, trying to separate his own beliefs, his wishes, from reality. Seha was right again. As much as he wanted the Jedi Order to remain impartial, things had gone too far for that. Yet, if he were to take sides, wouldn't he be affirming Jedi control over galactic affairs?
"Nelani? What do you think?" Jacen said slowly.
Nelani hesitated for several long seconds, before taking a deep breath and answering. "You once told me that what happened in the past is a useful learning tool, but that the past is unchangeable no matter what we do. All the examples you told me about, all the patterns I saw in history, they're all things that happened long ago. This is the present,

the elections are in the future. The Galactic Alliance is more than just a government to many. It represents hope, a unified galaxy. If it falls… even if the galaxy doesn't descend into chaos, that hope will be lost, and it might be a long time before the galaxy comes together again. It might take another 'Yuuzhan Vong' to make everyone realize that this galaxy is all of their homes'. Just because you might want to distance yourself from politics doesn't mean the other Jedi will also. If you're going to take an apolitical route, convince the Jedi Masters and Knights on the High Council to step down. If not…well…then I think Seha is right. If the Jedi are going to continue to be a guiding force in the Galactic Alliance, then one should step up now and become Chief of State."

"Should that person be me, then?" Jacen almost whispered.

"No," Nelani said with such conviction that Jacen couldn't help but gape at her.

"No?"

"No," Seha confirmed, agreeing with her counterpart. "You're *our* Master, our teacher, and friend. You can call us selfish, but we're not going to share you with the rest of the galaxy and let its burdens destroy the good man you are. Look what the position did to Cal Omas. I think a Jedi should be Chief of State, but it doesn't have to be you."

"Then who? Master Hamner did have a point when he said that the public wouldn't rally around anyone but someone they saw as a hero."

Even after two and a half years of being the Jedi Order's senate representative, of learning the intricate details of politics on Denon, and all the lessons his mother had given him to ready him for the position, Jacen knew he was still a relative novice at twenty-eight years young—especially compared to some of the life-time, centuries-old politicians he had to deal with. He knew that some thought of him as an idealist, an optimist, naïve to the real workings of the galaxy, and he let them think that; better for them to underestimate him than know his true abilities. But there were times such as this when he wondered if he hadn't truly gotten himself in over his head.

"After the Queen Mother has her baby, talk with the Council, Master," Nelani said gently, taking one of his hands. "This shouldn't be a problem you alone have to face. Tell them about it, about the arguments for and against it. The Jedi Order is more than one person after all."

The rest of the trip to the spaceport passed in relative silence as Jacen mulled over the words of his apprentices. In a way, they and Vergere were like two sides of a scale, balancing each other perfectly. Vergere would ask questions because she already knew the answers and

wanted him to come to them. But Seha and Nelani would ask questions because they truly wanted to know the answer. They all learned from each other, acting as support for each other in these trying times.
And Nelani and Seha were right in many ways. There was the reality he wanted, and the reality that existed. The Jedi *were* politicians, closely tied to the makeup of the Galactic Alliance itself. Would the Galactic Alliance continue to exist if the Jedi withdrew? Was it healthy for the Order to continue to be involved so intimately with the inner-workings of a galaxy-spanning government? The many questions continued to spiral about in his head as they neared the spaceport.
But as they got closer to the spaceport, other thoughts began to occupy him, temporarily taking his mind off things. For the closer they got to the spaceport, Jacen was reminded more and more of what awaited him—his lover and their unborn daughter.
A short time later, when the shuttle doors closed and the craft disembarked, the regent of sixty-three star-systems leaned against him, her eyes closed in contentment. In turn, he draped an arm around her and tilted his head to rest atop her own. Out of all the titles he had collected since the end of the war—war hero, senator, savior, next Grandmaster—he looked forward to earning the title of 'father' the most.
He was going to be a father.
He could still scarcely believe it.
He was both terrified and excited about the prospect.
And he definitely couldn't wait.
{-[III]-} {-[III]-}
Jacen smiled tenderly at the sight of Tenel Ka cradling their newborn daughter against her. The peace and happiness coming off the normally stern Queen Mother of sixty-three systems was something he never thought he'd feel so openly from her. Never thought he'd feel himself. He used the Force to send both his daughter and his lover all of the love he felt for the two of them, and Tenel Ka looked up at him with affectionate gray eyes.
"Thank you, Jacen."
He leaned forward and kissed her sweat-slickened forehead. "Thank *you*, for giving us such a wonderful daughter. I can already see her as the future Queen Mother of Hapes. She's going to be amazing."
Tenel Ka gently looked at the sleeping form tucked protectively in her arm. The strongest of emotions were shining from her as she let her fingers caress the very soft skin of her daughter's cheek. "Yes, she is. Allana is so much like her father, strong in the Force."
"Like her mother too," Jacen kissed Tenel Ka once more.

"She comes from very strong families."
"Between Taryn, Trista, my apprentices, and our two families, she's going to have more than enough people spoiling her silly," Jacen chuckled softly. He looked to the healers who had helped with the birth. "Thank you, the two of you, for helping."
The Mon Calamari healer, Jedi Master Cilghal smiled gently. "It was no problem, Jacen Solo. The birth of a child is always a refreshing break from my usual duties. Especially when it is a child of two young Jedi I have had the pleasure of watching grow up into fine people they are today."
The second of the two medical professionals, a Hapan doctor named Lalu Morwan, bowed low. "Thank *you* for the honor, Jedi Solo, Your Highness. I am simply fortunate enough to be the first Hapan in the presence of the *chume'da*."
Tenel Ka and Jacen bowed their heads in turn, and Cilghal smiled warmly. "I will leave you to things, then. Your child is in perfect health, Queen Mother."
"And I will go let the media know that the line of succession is secure with the birth of your beautiful daughter. By your leave," the Hapan doctor bowed one last time, and then left the room on Tenel Ka's assenting nod.
At the mention of Allana, Jacen turned back to his daughter, lightly touching her seemingly impossibly tiny hand with one of his fingers. Allana reflexively gripped it and didn't let go. He swallowed heavily, his eyes flicking back up to her mother. "And you'll be fine caring for her?"
"It was what we agreed to, wasn't it?" Tenel Ka nodded hesitantly, using the Force to communicate her reassurance.
A night of passion within the privacy of the Queen Mother's quarters. A clear night's sky. A fresh breeze wafting in from the open balcony doors, cooling their sweat-slickened bodies. The room was dark save for the soft glow that emanated from the planet's seven moons and the dazzling aura of the Transitory Mists. Silent save for rustling of trees outside and the occasional call of a night bird.
"I could stay," Jacen whispered softly, hand stroking the toned stomach of the woman he loved. The life they had started together was extremely faint, but definitely present. "Stay here, on Hapes. Together we can raise our child together, be a family."
"We both know that would never work, my dear friend," Tenel Ka returned, her voice just as soft, but full of regret. "My duty is to Hapes, yours is to the galaxy as a whole. You deal with enough politics at the Senate, the last thing you need is to worry about Hapan politics, and the daily assassination attempts on top of that."

"Tiki..."
"Jacen, the galaxy needs you. You are meant for so much more than just one planet or cluster of systems. With your position, you can make the whole galaxy so much better than it is right now; do more for our child out there, than here on Hapes."
Jacen went quiet, staring up at the smooth stone ceiling of the royal chambers. It had been painted to resemble a Dathomiri night's sky, glittering stars peeking out against light, wispy clouds.
"That's not to say I will not miss you," Tenel Ka whispered, giving his arm a hug. "I want our child to have her father in her life as much as possible. I <u>want</u> you to be in my life as much as possible. But if you stay too long on Hapes, you'll be dragged into the court intrigue and backstabbing that has become as much a culture on Hapes as it is its primary weakness. You don't need that distraction, not when your decisions affect things greater than Hapes. I will raise our daughter, and maybe by the time she takes the throne things will changed enough for her to actually be with the one she loves. To have that family we were denied because of our duties, because of politics."
"I know, but it doesn't mean I have to like that arrangement," Jacen sighed, continuing to touch his daughter both physically and through the Force. He had yet to lose that wonder-struck expression that had come over him ever since Allana's arrival into the world.
"The feeling is mutual. Were it possible I would rule Hapes with you at my side," Tenel Ka said, her voice catching slightly as she fought back a surge of emotion. "But the Force was kind enough to let us have this wonderful child. I do not wish to tempt fate any more than necessary."
Jacen swallowed heavily and nodded. "You're right. After everything we've gone through, I should be thankful just for being able to have the two of you. Are you ready for the others now?"
Tenel Ka tilted her head, somehow still looking regal despite being in a hospital gown. "I am."
Exhaling, Jacen reluctantly freed his finger from the tiny fist of his daughter and pushed away from the bedside. "Be back in a moment."
He strode across the room and the doors opened on his signal. Awaiting directly on the opposite side were Tenel Ka's loyal protectors and his apprentices. His two apprentices had been talking to Taryn and Trista in low voices, no doubt relaying what they were feeling in the Force. As they took note of him, four pairs of eyes looked up at him eagerly.
"Jedi Solo?"
"They're both okay," Jacen smiled reassuringly.

"Then we'll stand guard until you return with the former Queen Mother and the others," Trista said solemnly. "No one will get past us and harm your family; I swear it in the name of House Zel."
"Thanks. You don't have to be so serious though, Trista."
"Go get the others already," Taryn ordered, practically bouncing on the balls of her feet as she gestured to a room further down the hallway.
"Alright, alright."
Chuckling to himself, Jacen continued through the short hallway and to the nearby waiting room, a definite bounce in his step. The doors swooshed open, and expectant eyes all turned to him once more. Smiling broadly he held out his hands at his family and friends. His parents, Isolder and Teneniel, Zekk, Lowbacca, Luke and Mara and their children, were all seated with equally wide grins. "They're both fine. Come on, let me introduce you to Allana."
"Allana?" Ten year old Ben Skywalker tilted his head questioningly. He was sitting with Jedi Initiate Kani Asari, one of his friends from the Ossus Praxeum, and they both hopped off their chairs to join the others.
"Yup, named after my little brother and the founder of the Force Witches on Dathomir."
Jacen felt a small pang inside as he said it. He hadn't seen nor heard from his brother at all since the end of the war. Zonama Sekot was outside the range of any HoloNet buoys and the convoys that went to and from the planet were heavily guarded and top-secret due to the delicate nature of their presence within the galaxy. Added to the fact that his travels and his job as Jedi representative to the Senate had kept himself occupied, and he really didn't know anything about how his brother was doing outside of vague Force impressions. It was as if Anakin truly was dead to the rest of the galaxy.
As quick as the pang came, however, it disappeared as he forced those emotions away. Now was the time for celebrations of family present, not family lost.
"Jacen?" Janek Skywalker, Ben's younger brother, looked up at him with a small distressed crease on his forehead.
"Sorry about that," Jacen ruffled Janek's messy red hair. He sometimes forgot how empathic Force sensitive children could be to their surroundings. He made a note to remember that in the future. The last thing he wanted now was to hurt Allana with his troubled thoughts. He forced himself to smile again. "You're going to be an uncle now, Janek. Astral, isn't it?"
The seven-year old's eyes widened. "Wow, an uncle!"
"Yeah," Jacen chuckled as Janek ran off to tell his brother.

"Aren't they going to be second-cousins?" Zekk whispered.
"Shush, you try explaining complex kinship relations to a seven-year old," Jacen whispered back good-naturedly.
Reaching the door to the med-bay, the twins and two apprentices standing guard quickly bowed to the former Queen Mother and stepped back respectfully. Taryn activated the door panel for the small delegation, and the four waited until the group had entered before following them in.
Inside the med-room, a still glowing Tenel Ka sat with her daughter tucked against her, a tired but exhausted grin on her face.
"Mother, Father," Tenel Ka acknowledged her parents, unable to stop smiling despite the fatigue of childbirth. "Han, Leia."
"Daughter." Isolder stepped forward behind Teneniel. They were an interesting pair. Teneniel was once again wearing her standard Dathomiri leathers, but Isolder had on the proper dress of a Hapan noble. From the way they were holding hands, it was clear though that their absence from each other hadn't lessened the feelings the two had for each other one bit.
"Allana, these are your grandparents," Tenel Ka said gently to the sleeping child.
Teneniel rested a hand on the tiny bundle with the utmost of care, eyes briefly flickering close as she did. After a second, her eyes opened and she looked upon her daughter with kindness. "She will be a strong and wise ruler, Tenel Ka, like yourself. Always will she be surrounded by her friends and family, and be loved by her people."
Tenel Ka released a relieved breath. "Thank you, mother."
Teneniel smiled tenderly at her daughter embraced her and Allana in a hug. "You are everything I could have hoped for and more, Tenel Ka. I hope that your daughter will make you as proud as I am of you."
Tenel Ka couldn't help but shed tears of happiness as she nodded and whispered. "I love you."
"And I you," Teneniel and Isolder took a step back to allow Han and Leia to take their place. Both sets of parents exchanged smiles that were all excitement and joy.
"Congratulations," Han said with genuine happiness. "If Your Highness ever needs a royal babysitter, Leia and I would be happy to take over. We'll give the princess a ride or two in the *Falcon.*"
Tenel Ka smiled broadly, laughing as soft as she could as to not wake the baby. "Hapes thanks you and will more than likely take you up on your offer."
As the grandparents continued to fuss and admire the newborn, the others gathered around a still bewildered Jacen.

"You're a dad," Zekk chuckled.
"Still trying to get my head around that," Jacen said, making a sound of amusement. "And don't forget, Zekk, you agreed to be Allana's godfather."
"Hard to forget that." Zekk slapped Jacen's back supportively. "Look a little happier, Jacen. This is the birth of your daughter here."
"My daughter," Jacen repeated with a silly grin, as if trying to get used to the words. "My daughter."
"[For someone used to handling living creatures and baby animals, you seem oddly conflicted by Allana's birth]," Lowbacca said good-naturedly.
Jacen rolled his eyes at his larger friend. "I know, but she's a bit more than a baby animal, Lowie. She's…well…a part of *me*. I can feel her in the Force, like a part of my heart. It's scary in many ways, and even though I told myself I was ready for it…it's just…wow."
"Welcome to parenthood," Mara Jade Skywalker said, her children now at Tenel Ka's bedside looking up at their 'niece' with amazed eyes. "You'll now spend the rest of your life either fearing for your children, wanting to wring their necks, or being so proud of them and being at awe that they came from you."
"Thanks Aunt Mara," Jacen shook his head ruefully.
"It's too bad Jaina couldn't be here," Zekk said. "Did she say why she couldn't make it?"
Jacen nodded. "Trouble between the Chiss and Imperials. According to her message, it sounded like the entire thing is a tinderbox ready for that one spark. She doesn't think she'll have any free time for the near future, but wished me luck and told me to send holos."
The doors to the med-room opened, and General Livette entered with a grim expression on her face, instantly casting a pall over the festive mood.
"General?" Jacen raised an eyebrow.
"I apologize for intruding on this happy occasion, but there has been an…incident."
Jacen quickly moved back to his wife and daughter's side to help shield the newborn from any negative impressions as the atmosphere grew grimmer.
"Proceed," Tenel Ka said with a curt nod of her head.
"Thank you, Your Highness. Just an hour ago, a Hapan security patrol was engaged and destroyed by a Corellian force of unknown size by the Relephon Moons. Details are still coming in, but the additional ships sent to the Relephon system report that the Corellians are no longer present."

"[Relephon, that's deep in Hapan space]," Lowbacca growled. "[What are the Corellians doing there?]"
"Unknown," Livette shook her head. "House AlGray, the house that controls the Relephon region, denies any knowledge and appears to be innocent in this matter. She has pledged her House's full cooperation. One of the Battle Dragons destroyed belong to her security forces. I am told that all hands were lost."
"And the Corellian ships? Were any destroyed?"
"From what the Ducha AlGray reports, only a few fighters," Livette replied. "The bulk of the Corellian force suffered relatively minor damage due to the surprise nature of their attack. We've sent word to Corellia demanding an explanation, and have received the usual stalling in response."
The thick tension in the air was felt by all as they all knew just how serious the situation had become. If Tenel Ka failed to retaliate, members of the nobility would jump on this as a moment of weakness and try and remove her from power. If Tenel Ka did retaliate, war with the Corellians was unavoidable. The timing of the attack, pretty much at the same moment she was giving birth to her daughter, was suspect, but there was little she could do about that now.
"General Livette, ready the Royal Navy and reinforce all outlying sectors. Let them know that deadly force is authorized should they encounter any Corellian military vessels. Let the Corellians know this as well, their provocations have gone on long enough."
"Yes, Your Highness," Livette bowed formally and left the room.
Tenel Ka wearily looked at her friends and family. "I apologize, but if many of you stay, the Jedi Order risks being drawn into this conflict as well. To avoid the appearance that Hapes is receiving aid from the Jedi Order, I will have to ask most of you to leave."
"Of course," Mara nodded, her lips pressed together grimly.
"Jacen," Leia looked to her son. "Are you coming with us?"
Jacen held Tenel Ka's sharp gaze for a very, very long second. Words passed between them without even being spoken. Slowly, he looked away. "I am. It wouldn't look any better if a High Council member as on Hapes either."
"We'll watch over the Queen Mother and the *chume'da*," Trista said firmly, she and Taryn taking up positions on either side of Tenel Ka's bed.
"Friend Zekk," Tenel Ka gestured to the dark-haired Jedi just before he left the room with most of the others.
"Your Highness?"

"Hapes would appreciate it if you were assigned the position of Jedi Ambassador to the Consortium," Tenel Ka said shortly. "Your past experience with Hapes makes you the most suitable choice."
Understanding what she was doing, Zekk nodded once. "Jedi Knight Solo, do I have the approval of the High Council to stay on and look out for Jedi interests within the Consortium?"
Jacen shared a rare rush of feeling towards the other Jedi, who tilted his head in silent acknowledgment. Jacen might not have been able to stay without ruffling a few feathers, but a single Jedi acting as a diplomatic representative of the Order, could. Hapes never really had one before since Tenel Ka was also a Jedi, but it didn't mean that that always had to be the case.
Face tight, Jacen inclined his head. "As a member of the High Council, I approve of your appointment to the Hapes Consortium. I will inform the rest of the council about your position as soon as I am able. Your task is to protect any and all Jedi interests within the Consortium, to help keep peace and prosperity, and to inform the High Council should you deem any information necessary of their knowing."
"I accept my task," Zekk said, bowing solemnly. "Don't worry, Jacen. We'll be okay over here."
Thanks, Jacen sent telepathically, not trusting his voice as he turned around to catch up with his parents.
Don't mention it. We're beyond favors, remember? I'll keep your family safe, Jacen. Promise.
Jacen swallowed, fighting back more emotions than he could afford to feel at the moment. Almost immediately, Nelani gently slipped one of her hands into one of his, and Seha did the same to his free hand. Their Force presences promptly helped to ground him, siphoning off the storm of emotions and thoughts that had been running through him.
"Thanks, you two," he breathed, their footsteps loud and rapid in the near-empty halls of the palace.
"Any time, Master," Nelani replied in an equally soft voice. "The Queen Mother and your daughter are going to be okay. They have to be, right?"
"Yeah," Jacen answered, as if saying it would make it so. Even then, he could feel the doubts nibbling away as he fought the urge to look back over his shoulder. "They'll be just fine."
{-[Chapter End]-}

Ossus
{-[I]-} {-[I]-}

The Jedi Praxeum on Ossus was truly an artistic wonder—its architectural style borrowing heavily from the curvy and wave-like influences seen in Mon Calamari structures, and the more utilitarian building-styles of pre-war Coruscant. The most interesting aspect of the Jedi Order's central academy was that the architecture was also influenced by Yuuzhan Vong building styles as well. The layout of the sprawling compound was very reminiscent of the spiral-galaxy arrangements utilized by the Yuuzhan Vong buildings and fleets, which oddly complimented the Mon Calamari architectural features. Glinting brightly as they caught the sunlight, beautiful white, electrum-edged panels curved upwards and outwards like sails sitting atop spiraling, undulating waves. Ridged archways rose up in an intricate pattern amidst these white waves, spanning between specific points in the galaxy-shaped structure; the archways symbolically tying together systems that had historical significance to the Jedi Order.
And all around this gleaming white palace dedicated to the Jedi was a vast array of forests, caves, and mountains, as well as ruins of ages past. A group of Yuuzhan Vong shapers been heavily involved in the academy's founding, even staying on to help the natural flora and fauna, still stunted even after several millennia, thrive. Their presence, coupled with the talents of Jacen, Jedi Master T'ra Saa, and the other nature-inclined Jedi, made the planet a far cry from the desolate wasteland it had once been and more similar to the paradise it had been in ages past. Like the Ossus of the bygone era of the Old Republic, the planet was once again playing an active role in the accumulation of knowledge and teaching of the next generation of galactic protectors.
"Let the Force flow through you," Mara instructed with a hint of a smile on her face. The wooden wind chimes just outside of the meditation room of the Ossus Jedi Academy clacked together as the cool mountain breeze passed through. "You can feel it in every living creature, in the atoms of the duracrete around you. No matter where you are in this galaxy, even if you can't feel it, the Force will be with you."
"Mommy," seven year old Janek Skywalker raised his hand.
"Yes, Jedi Initiate Skywalker?" Mara said, affecting an expression of mock sternness.
"What about when there is a ysalamir nearby? Jedi Knight Lowie said that they take away the Force."
"Not take away, just block it," Mara said. "Like when you hold your hands up to your ears to block out Ben's singing. It's still there, but it's quieter."
"Mom!" Came the immediate protest from the other Skywalker child.

Mara's eyes twinkled. "Even if a ysalamir is keeping you from feeling the Force, don't worry. The Force is still there, watching over you. If you stay calm and analyze your situation without fear, you'll be able to eventually feel the Force again."
"Daddy says that the Force can't always help all of the time. Sometimes you need luck too," Jesmin Sarkin-Tainer chimed in.
"Luck definitely helps," Mara agreed. "Now all of you close your eyes again and reach out with the Force. Become one with the room, with the creatures in the forest outside. Feel the beating of their hearts, the rustling of the branches."
The class of sixteen young Jedi, all no older than eleven, did as they were told. One of the upsides of the ending of the war, before everything had started to fall apart again, was a sudden growth in the galaxy's population. The Jedi definitely had their own contributions, as many of the Jedi Knights and Masters used the two years of relative stability to start families of their own.
There were also the Force-sensitive war-orphaned children who had been picked up by various Jedi over the years. They had ranged in age, with the youngest being only five, to the oldest in their late teenage years. The older ones were already on assignment, while the younger ones thrived in the family-like atmosphere of the Ossus Praxeum.
Mara glanced about her young audience with a broad grin. Even if her time on the galactic stage had passed, it would only be a matter of time before the next generation had their turn. Soon there would be another set of Solos, Skywalkers, and Durrons wreaking havoc and facing off against impossible odds.
She still couldn't believe that Kyp had finally managed to settle down and have three kids of his own. The oldest of the three, six year old Ryza Durron, was among the group of children seated in front of her; looking impossibly cute with a yellow stripe painted across the bridge of her nose and miniature Jedi robes that seemed one size too large for her wrapped around her tiny form. The others, a five year old and a three year old boy, were with their mother, Kadra Bres-Durron—who had taken up the ailing Garm Bel Iblis' position and commanded the Outer Rim Security Fleet.
As unlikely as Durron having children was, Mara thought with a silent laugh, even more unlikely was her, a former Hand of the Emperor, being an actual mother of two. Someone with the time to be a proper mother to her children—declaring bed time, washing their faces, kissing scrapes and bruises—instead of running around the galaxy looking for intrigue and mayhem.

Both she and Luke had retired from the realm of politicking shortly after the war, devoting their lives to their two children and the new Jedi academy set up on Ossus. In a way, all of the students, the orphaned ones in particular, were simply an addition to their family. *Another dozen or so children without all the pain of labor and childbirth,* Mara mentally amended with a grin as she focused on her biological children.

Both Janek and Ben were close to one and other; territory that came with sharing the last name of Skywalker and all the pressures and spotlights that came with it. Despite the increased scrutiny and expectations, however, they were either too young to feel it, or just didn't care. If the galaxy turned against them, they still had each other as support. Even at their young ages, apart from the standard sibling fights, they were fiercely supportive of one and other.

And that support didn't stop at each other either. They encouraged their friends and the other students with smiles and demonstrations, becoming leaders in their own right even if they didn't realize it. Of course, their patience and *actual* teaching skills were most likely inherited from their father.

Former Grandmaster of the Jedi Order, Luke Skywalker was passing the days doing what he did best; teaching the next generation of apprentices and knights, and giving them a firm foundation from which to build off of. His lessons had obviously worked for Kam, Cilghal, and the others, and Mara had little doubt that the next generation of knights would be able to benefit from those lessons as well. The lessons were also good for him, with years melting away, no longer burdening him with galaxy-shaking decisions and the ever tiresome politics that went with being a prominent Jedi in the order. On Ossus, he was just 'Master Luke,' one of the many other teachers.

Never in all her many years of experience could she have seen herself as a teacher and a mother. Yet, for some reason, the lifestyle suited her. She had had enough of running around the galaxy, of the blasters and starships. It was definitely time for Mara Jade Skywalker to settle down and enjoy the peace she had fought for for so long.

The door to the meditation room opened, and Tionne Solusar, escorted by R2-D2, entered the room.

"Tionne," Mara smiled at the silver-haired historian. "I've got them all calmed down just for you."

Tionne's light laugh never ceased to brighten the room. "And here I was half expecting to walk in on some sort of sparring practice."

Mara was a wildly popular teacher among the younger students, mainly due to her wildly un-Jedi-like lessons. Unfortunately, telling

children to relax and clear one's mind after an adrenaline pumping sparring exercise, or mountain excursion, was nearly impossible. All of the Ossus instructors dreaded having any class that occurred after Mara's unique lessons, and often traded timeslots with each other like they were a highly valuable commodity.
"That's tomorrow," eight year old war-orphan from Chandrilla, Vekki Delin, said brightly. "After we levitate the water balloons over the instructor's quarters."
"We get to fly in the *Jade Shadow* later on this week to make up for it," nine year old Melodie, Cappricia, added with a smile.
Mara grimaced. Okay, so she wasn't exactly the best of teachers, but she loved teaching anyways.
Tionne just sighed, shaking her head resignedly and patting Mara on the shoulder. "Thanks for trying anyways, Master Skywalker."
"I really did try this time. I couldn't miss *your* wonderful lesson," Mara said, taking a seat next to her children. "Now what story do you have for us this time, Master Solusar?"
"A new one," Tionne said. "Those holocrons Jesmin's big brother sent back really had a lot of information dating back to the very old Republic era. Over three thousand years ago."
"Oooo," Mara rubbed her hands, allowing Janek to crawl into her lap.
Tionne took Mara's place at the front of the room. The doors in the back of the room slid open, and an older crowd entered. Tionne waved at them with a smile. "Hey, great timing!"
"How could we miss another one of your epic tales of daring and wonder?" Kyp said brightly, plopping down next to his daughter. "It makes our own adventures look drab and dull in comparison."
Luke Skywalker took a seat next to his wife and sons, a relaxed grin on his face. "You always were good at making your stories come to life, Tionne."
"Thank you, Master Skywalker," Tionne blushed slightly. As most of the parents and guardians settled down, Tionne made a brief gesture to draw the shades over the windows. A small orb floated out of the top of R2, and projected a dazzling array of stars on the darkened walls. "And thanks Artoo for helping out."
The astromech warbled happily, as it continued to project the vista of twinkling lights throughout the room.
Tionne smiled and folded her hands in front of her. "A long, long time ago, back before even Master Skywalker was born."
"That's *really* long then," Ben said with an impish grin, causing the others to giggle. He was one of the older children in the group, but didn't mind helping out with those around his brother's age. Though

there were others at Ossus around his age, he often stuck with the younger ones during free time and when he had a choice of lessons. When Mara had one time asked why he didn't want to be with the kids his age, he had responded:
"It's not that I don't want to be with them, it's just, the younger ones are all around Janek's age, and some of them don't have any family. So, since we're all Jedi, they're all like my little brother or sister to me; and because of Janek, I kind of want to help all of them out too. Is that wrong?"
Mara hadn't quite known what to say at the time, other than that she couldn't have been prouder of him. She shook herself from her thoughts to refocus back on Tionne's story.
"A really long time ago," Tionne nodded. "In fact, the records from this time were so old and scattered, that I don't even have a name for this hero."
The stars whirled around and coalesced into a robed figure with its face hidden within the robe's hood. As the older Jedi and their children listened in, Tionne couldn't help but feel her heart warm at the sight. This was all she could ever want in life, could ever hope for. Families of Jedi, the feelings of love and compassion. It only made her all the more determined to share the story she had in store.
"This was a time when the Sith were very much real," Tionne said her melodic voice changing as a red-bladed figure made up of stars appeared to challenge the hero-figure. "A time when the galaxy was at the very brink of war. You see, the Sith specialize in discord and chaos, thrive and draw their strength from the sufferings of others. The Republic of that time didn't have the strength to beat them in a war, but were strong enough that the Sith couldn't beat them outright. Both had half the galaxy, and both wanted the other half but couldn't get it. It was a cold war."
"Is a cold war fought on Hoth, with wampas and tauntauns?" Jesmin whispered in confusion to her father.
There were smiles from the older Jedi as Kell bent down and explained the concept in a quiet voice so as to not interrupt the story.
In the meantime Tionne continued. "Now, when compared to the population of an entire galaxy, one man or woman might not seem like much. After all, there are so many stars in the sky, so many systems, it all seems so big, doesn't it?"
The projector displayed Ossus, then steadily zoomed out, revealing a swirling galaxy in all its magnificence. The children all nodded, wide-eyed.

"But thanks to the actions of an ancient Jedi, a Jedi Knight Carsen, the galaxy shaking actions of one very brave Jedi were recorded and preserved in a holocron. Masters, Knights, apprentices, initiates, I present to you now the story of the Hero of Tython..."

As she spoke, her words weaving a wondrous tale of far off places, daring sword-fights, and epic space battles, the sun began to set in the distance. She told of heroes and villains, of an era so long ago it was almost forgotten. Of tragic deaths and triumphant victories, of spies and brave soldiers. Of romances and betrayals. Colorful cities of a bygone era were projected all around the room, the sounds of exotic animals, of a busy market on some distant world filling air. The sounds of blaster fire, of lightsabers humming, of walkers, and starship engines, played from R2 to accentuate the story. Tionne continued to speak, her words like magic as it captivated the young minds of her audience, preserving the history of the Jedi with every soft-spoken note.

It was sometime later when the story was over. Night had set and the day's lessons were finally over. The families filed out of the room. Some of the children would be going to the evening meal, others to their dormitories, or with their parents back to their homes. The informal nature of the Jedi Praxeum on Ossus sometimes made it more of a Jedi daycare or boarding school than an actual academy.

Unlike Jedi Orders of old, attachment and families were most definitely welcomed. Friendships, crushes, and feelings other than peace and serenity, while not exactly encouraged, were not discouraged either. The younger children especially, were allowed to keep in contact with their families and to navigate the various social bonds and troubles that came with growing up.

"Wonderful story, Tionne," Leia Organa Solo said, standing in the back of the room with her husband.

"Thank you," Tionne inclined her head politely. She was packing away several ancient Jedi artifacts that had been included in the story. It wasn't every day one got to see a three thousand year old holocron or lightsaber. "I enjoyed telling it just as much as the children enjoy listening."

R2-D2 blerped in objection.

"You did a great job too, Artoo," Leia laughed, walking forward to pat the domed-head of the astromech. "You really made that story come to life."

R2 warbled, pacified, which caused the humans around it to grin.

"What brings the two of you to Ossus so early?" Mara asked, waving goodbye to her children as Luke took them off to the dining commons.
"We weren't scheduled to go to Hapes for another few days."
"A favor, actually," Leia said, looking sheepish. "Han actually managed to talk me into not talking myself out of it."
"Oh?" Mara smiled at her sister-in-law.
"Can you teach me how to use the Force?" Leia said directly.
"Oh?" Mara's eyebrows rose.
"Yeah," Leia chuckled. "I know it's a little late for me, but if I have the abilities. I figured connecting with the Force will help me better connect with my children, with this galaxy, and help me make this galaxy a better place."
"Shouldn't you and Han be enjoying your second honeymoon?" Tionne asked lightly.
"What she said," Mara added with a nod. "Force knows you two deserve one."
"Kind of hard to do," Han interjected. "We have two Wookies who insist on carrying out a life-debt in the place of Chewie. Two Noghri who insist on being our bodyguards no matter where we go. And Threepio, who seems to annoy everyone we leave him with, causing more headaches than he's worth."
"Anyway," Leia said. "Han and I got to talking. With the galaxy in the state it's in now, the last thing it needs is another politician. And being a politician is all I really know. If you have the time, or know someone else who does, I'd like to start embracing the Jedi-part of my heritage. Maybe I can make a difference as a Jedi."
"Whether I'd be a good master for you actually depends on what type of Jedi you want to be," Mara said, sitting down on the smooth granite floor. "If you want to be assigned to a single planet, like the Mareks or Horns, I might be able to help you there. If you want to be one of those adventuring types like your children, however, the best way you can learn is through experience out in the stars. I probably won't be the best teacher for you, then. Luke and I have settled down, and we're quite happy here."
"Do you have another Jedi in mind?" Leia asked, not at all disappointed.
"If you've really thought long and hard about this, go to Master Sebatyne on Yavin Four," Mara supplied. "Where Ossus is focused more on an instructional, research angle, Yavin Four handles many of our older students and more adventurous galactic assignments. Master Sebatyne, Master Kel, and Master Ramis are the main instructors

there, and they alternate going on assignments with their students. You should be able to find a teacher there."
"Thank you."
"It's what family's for," Mara shrugged. "Are you and Han staying for dinner? Lando's going to drop by later and put on some type of lightshow for the families here, so we're eating outside."
"We might as well," Leia nodded, as Han also tilted his head in agreement. "How have you and my brother been doing?"
"Busy," Mara laughed. "Who knew that taking care of two Force sensitive boys would be more challenging than some of the assignment the Emperor gave me?"
Leia chuckled. "I could have told you as much, Mara."
"Between our children and the classes we teach, we have our hands full. It's a busy life, but we're happy, content."
"I'm glad," Leia gently brushed her hand against Mara's arm.
"Yeah, me too. Your brother's much more fun, more of that Farmboy from Tatooine, when the only thing he has to worry about is whether he packed the kids' lunch or whether he has to do the dishes or pick up the kids from class. You and Han?"
"Busy," Han answered. "But at least it's the sort of good busy."
"We've been trying to help several of the reconstruction and restoration efforts," Leia elaborated. "Apparently the 'Solo' name helps gets a few wheels greased and stalled applications and allotments un-stalled."
"Like Tionne said, you guys really need to take that second honeymoon," Mara said wryly. "There's more to life than saving the galaxy you know."
"This coming from you?"
"I became wiser with age," Mara mock huffed. "What's your excuse?"
"We're Solos," Leia shrugged, as if that explained everything.
"Right," Mara rolled her eyes and stood again. Brushing herself off, she gestured towards the doors. "Come on, hopefully Luke's saved two extra places for us at the table. Four, if Cakhmaim and Meewalh are joining us?
"It's alright. They said they'd eat on the *Falcon.*"
"I guess with an entire building full of Jedi, they decided that we were safe enough," Han added. "And they're probably right. Who in their right mind would try to make trouble at a Jedi Praxeum?"
{-[II]-} {-[II]-}
"Look, the Mandalorians!" Excited cries from the younger Jedi broke through the evening meal chatter. Everyone temporarily stopped what they were doing to see a squad of heavily armored individuals emerge

from the direction of the praxeum's landing pads. Helmets held in their arms, their matching blue or gold painted armor accented stern-looking faces.
The night air was warm and comfortable, and the dazzling array of stars above was unmarred by any sort of light pollution. Only the faint glow of bio-engineered bioluminescent Yuuzhan Vong reeds illuminated the paths to and from the courtyard. But with the Force as their guides, the occupants seated along the long benches didn't need light to see the new arrivals.
"Big brother!" Jesmin Sarkin-Tainer exclaimed brightly. The seven-year old swung her legs over the side of the bench and took off in a flash. Laughing, Jedi Knight Doran Sarkin-Tainer bent down and caught her as she flung herself at him in an affectionate flying leap. "Hey there, Jesmin. Miss me?"
"Uh huh," the young girl beamed, looking absolutely tiny against her older brother's much larger body. "Guess what! I levitated three rocks today, at the same time!"
"Really? That's great!" Doran shifted so he could continue to support his younger sister and walk at the same time. "You'll definitely be a Jedi Knight in no time."
"Glad you could make it," Kell Tainer said with a youthful smile.
"Thanks dad. Sorry we're a little late, but we had to pick up a few extras."
"Your guests?"
"Right," Doran set Jesmin back down on the ground and gestured to the Mandalorians behind him and his apprentice. "This is the new *Mand'alor,* Belok Rhal."
"Mandalore," Mara Jade Skywalker greeted politely.
"Jedi," Belok said coolly.
"*Mand'alor* , Kyrelle, and I were discussing using the newly built Mandalorian fleets to help safeguard areas currently being protected by the Jedi," Doran explained. "They take over and free up more Jedi for the rest of the galaxy."
"For a sizable fee, of course," Belok added. "Mandalorians are not charity workers after all."
"As mercenary as ever," Mara quipped. "Whatever happened to the previous Mandalore?"
"Boba Fett stepped down after the Vong War ended," Kyrelle explained. "Dinua's dad, Beviin, took over for a little bit, but he also stepped down last year, after that Tion Hegemony mess. Belok's been leading the Mandalorians ever since."

"The negotiations were running a bit over so I invited him and some of his clan to dinner," Doran finished with a sheepish shrug.
"You're more than welcome, Mandalore," Tionne said gracefully. "Appreciated."
Despite the initial eagerness, however, a majority of the younger Jedi seemed a bit cowed by the armored and tough auras the Mandalorian party was exuding. The conversation died down as the young ones appeared anxious to know where these imposing men and women would sit. The potential situation was alleviated only moments later when a young, blond-haired girl around ten years old fearlessly came up to the heavily armored Mandalorians with a platter of appetizers.
"Here. Try some, they're good."
Raising an eyebrow, Belok did as he was bid, the other five with him following his lead. After taking a few bites, he nodded once. "They are acceptable."
"There's more than enough for seconds. You know you just can't take one."
Belok smiled faintly. "You've got spirit, girl. What's your name?"
"Jedi Initiate Kani Asari," the golden-haired girl bent her knees in a half-curtsy. "Come have a seat at our table, we have room."
"One of our braver initiates," Doran deadpanned. "Don't worry, the young ones aren't all like her."
Belok shrugged. "A pity. It would seem your Order is poorer for it. Jedi Initiate Asari, lead the way."
"Yes, Mandalore, sir!" Kani grinned, taking his hand and tugging him towards the table she had stood from.
"So much like my daughter," Belok murmured under his breath.
Kani's sharp ears picked it up and she looked up to the Mandalorian leader. "Oh, what's her name?"
"She was called Bralir," Belok said stiffly.
"'Was'?" Kani's expression fell.
"She and her mother were killed when the *Vongese* razed *Manda'yaim*."
"Oh…I'm…Sorry never does seem to be enough, does it?"
"No. You've experienced loss too. I can see it in your eyes, child."
"My parents. They're…gone. Also the war."
"*Nu kyr'adyc, shi taab'echaaj'la*."
"Huh?"
"A benediction to those we care for who have had the misfortune to fall before us," Belok answered stiffly. He placed a hand on Kani's shoulder. "But enough of these thoughts. Now is the time for eating."

"Right," Kani forced a brave smile and gestured to the other Mandalorians. "I hope you're hungry. Master Solusar makes a mean Adumari roasted waterfowl."
With the Mandalorians seated, Jesmin led her brother and Kyrelle over to another table, and started chatting away about her latest achievements. The other conversations and good cheer started up again, the meal resuming as if nothing had happened.
A little while later, Lando Calrissian announced his arrival with a garish firework display that was met with great applause. The entrepreneur and showman flashed his pearly whites and laughter filled the air, regaling them all with his exaggerated tales of greatness and daring. It was a peaceful night, a happy night, one filled with family and friends. In short, it was just another night at the Jedi Praxeum on Ossus.
{-[III]-} {-[III]-}
As the morning light once again washed over the flowing white arches of the Ossus Praxeum, a small group of students were already deeply immersed in their studies.
"That's it," Jedi Master Tallisibeth Enwandung-Esterhazy, or Scout to her students, coached. Now entering the seventieth year of her life, Scout had remained with the Jedi Order despite having a home back on Mandalore. She, like many other Jedi of the previous Order, wanted to dedicate the last of her years teaching the next generation what she knew, sharing with them the secrets of the old order so that they wouldn't be lost forever. "Focus not on what your partner is already doing, but on what they *will* do."
Ben Skywalker, with the 'older' students, focused his sharp blue eyes on the ten-year old girl across from him. Kani Asari, his best friend and greatest source of distress. They tended to work well together on many assignments. That is, unless they were getting on each other's nerves and angering the other to no end; which seemed to happen just as often as them getting along. Whenever their instructors paired them together, they could only hold their breaths and pray for the best. Unfortunately, Scout happened to not be as lucky. Kani had been angry with him since last night's meal, and he was *still* trying to figure out why.
"Ouch!" Ben yelped, shaking his arm off as Kani backed away from her lightning-fast kick.
"Concentrate, Skywalker," Kani said, her voice just a note away from mocking.
Ben shook himself from his thoughts and narrowed his eyes. Recalling the instructions Scout had taught them, he called on the Force and focused on his currently not-so-best-friend. The Force allowed him to

sense the air around her, the slight tightening of her muscles as she coiled them for a strike. All at once he could see possible movements, hundreds of ways she could attack him next. He breathed in, released his breath, and tried to determine which of those possibilities was about to occur. Suddenly, one of the images he was seeing darkened. At the last moment, Ben blocked another spinning kick and tried to dump Kani to the ground. The blond girl, however, used her moment to gracefully launch herself into a series of flips. She landed on her feet, tilted her chin up at him and flipped her hair, before dropping back into her combat stance.
"What'd you do this time, Ben?" Fourteen year old Azil Rhees, a Gran student said lightly.
"I have no idea," Ben muttered back. Being a Skywalker meant he had friends in all age groups, and Azil was among them.
Using a Gran's innate ability to read emotions, Azil tilted his head. "Whatever it is, you both angered and hurt her. You should probably apologize."
"For what?" Ben said in exasperation.
"I don't know, but I've always heard that apologizing solves a lot of problems. I have to get back to the exercise, now. Master Esterhazy is glaring at me."
"Some help you are!" Ben groaned. He glanced back to Kani, who was awaiting him with a challenging lift of her eyebrow.
Doing his best to conceal his intentions, he began his approach. Her own purple eyes seemed to follow his every step like a hawk, glimmering with anticipation. As a war orphan and someone who had been traumatized by all the deaths she had felt during the Yuuzhan Vong War, Kani normally shunned violence and usage of the Force. But she never seemed to have any problem using it to kick his butt. They had become friends two years earlier, bonding over the fact that they had both been too scared to use the Force in any significant manner for fear of feeling more death. They had somehow both helped each other work through their mental hang-ups, and since then would almost always call on the other if they needed help.
If only he could call on their bond and figure out what he did wrong, Ben mentally sighed. He threw out a series of rapid punches, using the hand-to-hand combat techniques also taught by Scout. She dodged the first few and then lashed out with her foot once more.
Ben had never been more grateful for the protection provided by the protective sparring equipment than he had been at that moment.
"Sorry," he managed, quickly pedaling backwards and out of range.

The amethyst fire he saw in her eyes died down slightly as she sent him a pouting glare. "You should be."
He wracked through his mind, trying to find out what about last night's conversation had upset her. Evidently she wasn't as patient and her purple eyes seemed to glow a bit brighter in the morning sunlight.
Suddenly Ben found himself watching the previous night's dinner—in the very same courtyard they were now sparring in—in ghostly form.
He wasn't surprised. She had done this several times before; pulled them into the past. The first time it had happened, it had stunned him, but he has since grown used to it. His cousin Jacen had told him that the ability was a form of Flow-Walking, and that Kani seemed to be able to do it intuitively.
She had just explained that it was something she had always been able to do. As a young orphan girl, frightened by the terrors of war, she had wanted her mommy and daddy and had instinctively used the Force to try and be with them. Since then, under Jacen's guidance via comm-calls, she had gained some amount of control over it. But apart from moments with her parents, she could only use her abilities to go back, at most, a few days at a time. She had also only recently gained the ability to take Ben with her when she did.
And now the two of them were almost ghostly in appearance as they watched the dinner from the previous night. It was before the Mandalorians had arrived, while everyone was waiting for the serving droids to finish bringing out the food from the kitchens.
"So, I'm going to be going with my mom, and dad, and Janek, along with my aunt and uncle to see the birth of my cousin's baby. Isn't that cool?"
"Yeah," last-night's Kani said with forced enthusiasm. Unlike the previous night, Ben could clearly feel her emotions this time. Bitterness and jealousy mingled with sadness and hurt as her last-night's self kept up a brave front.
"Not sure when we'll be back. But I'll have my entire family there so it won't really matter. I mean, I get to see my mom and dad practically every day, but it's nice to just <u>be</u> with them without having to share them with the dozens of other students. And I almost never see Jacen or Jaina. It's been <u>ages</u> since we've had a family outing."
"Have fun."
"I will," last-night's Ben nodded eagerly. He continued to go on about he looked forward to seeing Jacen again, how he couldn't wait for his uncle to let him fly the *Falcon*, unaware of the pain growing in last-night's Kani's chest.

"I'm sure it will be great," this time last-night's Kani was forced to look away to keep him from seeing a tear form.
All at once, Ben found himself back in the Ossus courtyard. The two suns continued to shine above them, and the students around them continued to train, but they seemed to fade away as he became keenly aware of just how much he had hurt her. Her eyes were shining again, both accusatory, but also full of hurt. And he suddenly felt like the lowest of the lowest scum. Here he had been, going on about his family, about spending time and enjoying the break away from the others, when she really had no family of her own. When she didn't have that luxury to be zipped away for the birth of a cousin's baby, or have that uncle who spoiled her rotten.
Forgetting the exercises, Ben quickly walked to her and hugged her. She stiffened at first, but then began to sniffle. "Come back fast, please, Ben?"
"I promise," Ben muttered, using their Force bond to communicate just how sorry he was for unintentionally hurting her. "The moment we leave Hapes, I'll have Uncle Han take me and Janek and mom and dad back here."
Then, as if a switched was flipped, they both froze. Shyly, and with heat rushing to their cheeks, they quickly stepped apart and tried to look anywhere but at each other.
"Time to change partners!" Scout called out conveniently, her amusement-filled gaze lingering on two of her younger students.
"We'll go to our spot after this?" Ben asked.
Kani nodded, wringing her hands. "Yeah. I meant it though, have fun with your family."
"Want a souvenir from Hapes? I mean, Cousin Jacen *is* the dad of the Queen Mother's baby."
Kani nodded again. "I'll tell you later."
And just like that, the two were an unbeatable team again, even if they had just changed partners.
{-[IV]-} {-[IV]-}
"Like this," Cappricia said, brushing off a dirt-covered crystal with the soft brush in her hand. The Melodie then handed the brush and another dirt-covered crystal over to one of her younger partners. "Here, Janek, you try."
The seven-year old carefully took the crystal and brush and mimicked the Melodie's actions. "Like this?"
"Uh huh." Cappricia handed brushes and more dirt-covered objects to the others in her group. "Now, Master Sitra said that these are part of

the records of the old library here. We're all helping the Jedi Order by recovering these bits of information. Right Master Sitra?"
The Melodie looked up to the purple-skinned Twi'lek Jedi, Jedi Master Rachi Sitra, who was supervising the excavations at the Great Jedi Library. "Correct, Initiate. For example, the shard you just cleaned."
Cappricia handed over the crystal, and Rachi plugged it into a specially modified holoprojector.
An image immediately formed, and for a couple of seconds, a Jedi from millennia past could be seen demonstrating several lightsaber moves. The image was grainy, and there was little explanation, but it was just a miracle as it was to see the ancient information it contained. The scene ended though, and the crystal appeared to blacken.
"It's gone," one of the younger students said in surprise.
"Don't worry," Rachi said, gesturing to the device. "The information, no matter how small or corrupted, has been stored in this for later analysis. Many of the crystals and datacards you're finding are very, very old."
"Like from the time of the Hero of Tython," Janek said, making the connection.
"Right, around that time," Rachi agreed.
The young Jedi all looked awed at the collection laid out before them. It was one thing to hear a story and see a few trinkets of the past, but it was another entirely to be a part of its uncovering. They diligently went to work cleaning the crystals and datachips in front of them as Mara, Han, and Rachi looked on.
"You still want to trust them with those things?" Mara said in a low voice. She and Han were on the 'fieldtrip' as chaperones for the dozen-plus budding Jedi. "I mean, they *are* kids."
"Don't worry, much of the information has already been codified by the older students," Rachi replied back just as softly. "It was getting the data crystals and chips dirty again without damaging them that was the hard part."
"Is there anything we don't already have?"
"A couple," Rachi murmured. "Some were too risky to scan more than once. Others can handle being dropped by less deft hands. Strangely enough, Master Skywalker, I do know what I'm doing. Archaeology has always been a hobby of mine."
"I know," Mara chuckled. "Just never thought I'd actually see a Jedi archaeologist in action."
"With the way the galaxy was going, neither did I," Rachi retorted with a grin.

"Still don't see the point in this," Han scratched the back of his head. "I mean, isn't this a whole new Jedi Order, with your own way of doing things? What's the point of digging up all these old Jedi relics and datachips that probably have data several thousand years out of date? Digging through *my* past certainly won't tell you anything about the life I'm living today."
Rachi glanced mildly at the former smuggler. "I do not expect a person like you, Mr. Solo, to appreciate the finer points of archaeology. There is no doubt that unless you are running from people wanting to kill you and avoiding well-planned death traps, you would not find it interesting. The Jedi Order is built upon the successes and failures of Orders past. We would not be aware of those successes and failures if we do not spend the time and effort to preserve it for future generations to learn from."
"All right, all right," Han held up his hands in surrender. "Sorry, your great Jediness. Didn't mean to step on your toes. It all just seems, well….boring. I mean, cleaning rocks and datapads? Leave it to a droid. My kids would have run away if told to clean something up, especially if it was their rooms. So there has to be something wrong with these Jedi kids you're raising."
Mara smirked at her brother-in-law. "Master Sitra might be right Han. Why don't you go venture into the Jedi Library and see if you can't find us some Jedi cultists to fight. That will probably make things more like your kind of archaeology."
"I would, but your boy beat me to it already," Han said alluding to one of Ben's earlier adventures.
"Master, someone's coming," Cappricia interrupted, straightening and point towards the mountain pass.
Rachi motioned for the children to line up, and they did so obediently. Mara silently stood in line next to Rachi, her green eyes sparkling with warmth.
Han, however, just rolled his eyes and leaned against a large boulder. "Speak of the Hutt."
"Hail, Ysanna," Rachi called out.
"Hail, Jedi," a voice echoed in response. Several large creatures lumbered into view, each with a group of individuals on their backs. They reached the perimeter of the ancient library and dismounted.
A group of dark-skinned individuals wielding slug-throwers and wearing masks based off of ancient Sith designs, all gathered around a single elderly figure. They were the Ysanna, Ossus' only indigenous population. Descendants of Jedi of ancient times, for the Ysanna it was more unheard of for someone to *not* be Force-sensitive, than for

someone to have the abilities. For the longest time though, they had had very little training, and considered the ability to use the Force more akin to magic than anything else. That was until a Jedi fleeing Palpatine's Purge landed on the war-torn planet and took over the local tribes as their ruler.
The Ysanna and their ruler had watched from the shadows as the Jedi Praxeum was built up, staying out of the way of the Jedi in both fear and doubt. Eventually, though, contact was made.
A year earlier, Ben and some of his friends had been exploring the Great Jedi Library and had encountered several Ysanna children doing the same. Ben and the others were taken back to the primary Ysanna village and to the leader. There they had discovered that the Purge-era Jedi had fallen to the dark-side and believed himself to be the only 'true' Jedi remaining. A short series of adventures, and a couple of white hairs for Mara and Luke later, and Ben and his friends had managed to not only help redeem the fallen Jedi, but establish a strong friendship with the Ysanna people.
Tionne had considered the alliance more than poetic—three different lineages of the Orders of past times coming together for a rebirth of a new kind of Jedi, on a planet likewise being resurrected. All three were also benefiting from the alliance, with both cultural lessons and Force-based lessons being exchanged on many levels.
"Lord Travgen," Rachi addressed the ruler of the local people with a polite tilt of her head.
"Jedi Sirta. I hear today is a day for lessons with the younglings," the elderly man chuckled.
"You've heard correctly," the Twi'lek master said.
"Good, I brought some Ysanna who would benefit from learning of the past," He gestured and a group of children around the same age as the young Jedi of Janek and Cappricia's group, all quested forward. "They will help you reclaim what the Jedi have lost."
"Thank you, Lord Travgen."
"Indeed. When you are finished here, send them back. They know the way."
"Come on," Janek called out eagerly to several of the Ysanna children. Neither group of children were strangers to the other. As they became older, they would even share in each other's lesson on Force techniques. "We're cleaning data crystals today."
And just like that, the two groups of children meshed seamlessly. Hands grabbed cleaning brushes or soft cloths, while others passed around the findings pulled out of the ancient repository. Excited chatter filled the air, and Mara, Han, Rachi, and two of the older

Ysanna warriors moved from one group of children to the next with their special holoreaders.
Life had returned to the Great Jedi Library, and soon its knowledge would once again be able to be shared by the Jedi Order.
{-[V]-} {-[V]-}
While the sounds of various training exercises wafted up through the wide open windows of the archway known to the occupants of the Ossus Praxeum as Coruscant-to-Yavin, several older Jedi Knights were gathered around the upper-most room's holoprojector. Jedi Master Jaden Korr's image shimmered as he addressed the gathered crowd.
"Thank you all for coming. I'm sure by now you're aware of a critical problem facing this Order."
"The missing initiates," Jedi Knight Si'ada said knowingly.
"*Yes. In the past seven years, nearly sixty-three potential Jedi were taken from their homes before our own teams could reach them. In each case, the families were under the impression that the ones that came before our people were representatives of the Jedi Order. Of those sixty-three, twenty-eight of them are from this year alone. And all this is in addition to the sudden absence of a majority of the Nightsister clans on Dathomir.*
This creates a problem on three levels.
One, with at least sixty-three potential Jedi missing, the younger population of our own praxeums have been declining.
Two, sixty-three potential Jedi missing means that someone has been collecting them for means that cannot possibly have any good bearing on this galaxy.
And three, even after our seven years of investigation we are no closer to uncovering the culprit then we were when investigations first began. Though in the past we have only sent out teams of four or six to look into this matter, in light of the current state of the galaxy, the High Council has decided that the issue has gone on long enough, has become too serious. We're drawing the Ossus Praxeum's reserves and tasking all of you with finding out where exactly these sixty-three potential students have gone. We know they are still alive, as some of the families they come from are Force sensitive and can still feel them. We also know that the same group of individuals is responsible for taking each student, and is almost certainly dispatched <u>after</u> Ossus receives word of a possible initiate."
"So…all of us are being sent out?" Jedi Knight Bazel Warv asked.
"Yes. The sixteen of you currently present. Most of you will be dispatched in teams of two to locations that might or might not contain leads. While helping out the people of your assigned area will be your

main goal, your secondary objective is to learn whatever you can about the missing initiates. Some of you, Jedi Knight Warv, Jedi Knight Hellin, Jedi Apprentice Rivai, and Jedi Apprentice Twool, will be assigned pick-up duty for several more potential Jedi recruits. We will be delaying the official transmissions in hopes that you can arrive before the mysterious kidnappers do, or at least in time to challenge them. Due to the risky danger of the mission, you'll be assisted by the Jedi Death Knights of Yavin Four. "

Si'ada grimaced, while the others quickly sobered. The Death Knights had changed in both purpose and image in the years following the war. And though the change had been for the better for the Death Knights, she still objected to their philosophies and practices. She knew she wasn't the only one.

The Death Knights may have become a far cry from the grief-stricken and rage-filled pilots that had been the Death Knight's original incarnation, but the thirteen Death Knights were no-more welcomed by a majority of the Order than their predecessors had been. Too many saw them as 'dark Jedi pretending to be light,' and their philosophies as perversions of the ancient Jedi teachings. The Tion Hegemony incident didn't help any either. Yet Waxarn Kel, Octa Ramis, and Saba Sebatyne weathered the storm of criticisms without complaint, and continued to vouch for their crack team of Jedi warriors.

"*I know your feelings about working with Master Kel's people, Si'ada, and I apologize."*

"We're desperate for answers, I understand," Si'ada said with a brave grimace, trying not to think about her former master and the first generation of Death Knights. "Don't worry, I won't let my personal feelings get in the way."

"*Thank you."* Jaden turned his gaze back to the rest of the crowd. *"I am transmitting your orders now. A word of advice, if you will notice, most of you are receiving coordinates to areas high in refugees and low in governmental control. Do your best to bring the light to these darkened corners first, and maybe the people there will be more willing to assist you. Contact the council if you find anything. Denon, out."*

{-[VI]-} {-[VI]-}

At the apex of another archway, Tython-to-Ossus, a much more serious meeting of politicians was taking place. Master Cilghal, backed by Master Kam Solusar, were both in range of a holo-camera as they attended the High Council meeting on Denon.

"That's out of the question," Kam said coolly. "Unlike in the Yuuzhan Vong War, our students are just that, students."

"I concur. There is no guarantee the crime levels will decrease even if we let the apprentices and younger Jedi join the older ones already in the field," Cilghal said calmly, though there was a hint of steel in her voice.
"It may not be an official war, but we <u>are</u> at war, Jedi Master. The crime rate has continued to skyrocket despite all our best efforts. Several smaller governments have already collapsed from it and descended into anarchy. We need the Jedi out in the field, and urgently, regardless of how young they are." The hologram of Director of Allied Intelligence, Belindi Kalenda argued.
"What Jedi we can spare are already working with the refugees and transient populations," Cilghal said. "Those we still have at Ossus are present for both security purposes and to teach the younger generation. If the nearly hundred and fifty Jedi already in the field can't make a difference, what little we can spare will hardly help. I will not allow another generation of Jedi to lose their childhoods."
"The same goes with Yavin Four," Octa Ramis' own hologram agreed. *"Our own part of that one hundred and fifty is tied up with taking down organized crime and slaving rings. We're every bit as stretched as they are."*
"Dathomir has likewise contributed to the Galactic Alliance fleets and Intelligence units," Kirana Ti voiced. *"We have forty-eight of our people already out and can spare no more."*
"What about the Corellian Praxeum?" Senator Ta'laam Ranth, Minister of Justice, asked. *"Aren't they a part of the Order? Corellia and her allies are relative stable so they should be available."*
"The Corellian Praxeum was founded only two years ago. They are still forming an identity, building up their numbers. They have eight full-time Jedi available for missions, and all are being used," Jacen Solo replied professionally. *"No matter how much you want us to pull more Jedi out of thin air, that just isn't possible, senators."*
"Rather than attack the symptoms, would it not be better if we looked for the cause?" Cilghal recommended. "What is causing these spikes in crime?"
"*We've been looking for the answer the past five years,"* Belindi said with a tired shake of her head. *"And we're no closer to discovering the cause than we were at that time. The moment we take down one crime syndicate another seems to pop up overnight. And now, now things are slowly slipping from our control. It's only a matter of time before something catastrophic slips through our net. The Jedi are the only ones capable of seeking out these unconventional threats."*

"If I may, I might have a solution," Commerce Minister, Pal'iva Konat said. "*Detach the Jedi from the Galactic Alliance groups and have them work independently. They can go where a very noticeable military fleet can't, have contacts even our intelligence people don't have."*
"We're counting on the Jedi in several key sectors to hold back the pirate groups," Supreme Commander Gilad Pellaeon commented. *"We'll have to move some of our ships around to compensate."*
"[No choice,]" Senator Triebakk, Minister of Defense, said. "*[If we want to get to the bottom of this and not get bled to death by the increasing crime, we have to do it.]"*
"Master Cilghal, would you be willing to re-assign, say sixty-percent of Ossus' Jedi to this issue?" Belindi asked.
"At most, ten percent," Cilghal said in a tone that brooked no argument. "The students from Ossus are better suited aiding the refugees and displaced people than combating pirates. Also, if you take away aid from these refugees, in all likelihood, we'll be facing those refugees as pirates later on."
"Even if we reassign people, at most you'll be able to get half our Jedi in the field," Octa echoed. *"Many of our people are embedded in criminal syndicates or cannot otherwise be withdrawn without grave consequences."*
"Apart from Supreme Commander Pellaeon's objections, those of Dathomir would be the only ones in position to distance themselves from their current operations," Kirana spoke. *"But again, our people know little of this galaxy and more of battle. It would not be the most efficient use of our Knights if we have them investigate the cause for all this crime."*
"Then we're at an impasse, then," Cal Omas said resignedly. *"I know you Jedi aren't meant to be the galaxy's police, but at the moment, no one else is capable of stepping up for the job. I have half a dozen systems threatening to secede, four dozen aid projects bogged down with politics and various setbacks, and a military ill-equipped to handle this new threat. Please, Jedi, please reconsider your stance about sending the younger ones out. I recall that we had Jedi as young as twelve fighting in the war, and as distasteful as it is to ruin the childhood of another generation, we might not have a choice. If we don't act soon, those children might not have much of an adulthood to grow up into. They don't have to be on the frontlines. We can have the younger ones take over some of the duties of the older ones, free the older Jedi up for more dangerous missions."*
Cilghal, Kirana, and Octa all pursed their lips as they considered the Chief of State's plea.

"*It appears we really do have little choice,*" Tresina Lobi said reluctantly. *"This is not just the Galactic Alliance we would be saving, but the stabilization of the galaxy as a whole."*
"We'd be ending a whole lot of suffering if we finally uncovered why everyone seems to have turned to illicit activities," new Jedi Council member, Barratk'l, said, seemingly leaning towards agreeing with Cal Omas.
"I'm hardly the most impartial here," Jacen said, looking solemn. "*But like the Jedi of the Shelter during the war, it's better if the kids get some hands-on-experience than founder around and be helpless if they're ever cut off from the rest of us. This is a new type of galaxy, and the only way they'll learn how to help it is by being out there, seeing what it's like.*"
Seconds passed in silence as the Jedi members silently conferred with one and other. The dislike for the plan was evident in the scowls of their faces, but they could also see the necessity of it.
"Thirteen, then, but no younger," Cilghal finally said, releasing a breath. "That'll enable Ossus to put another thirty-four Jedi in the field and free up some of the older ones."
"We'll follow Ossus' lead," Octa said, though she seemed likewise uneasy with the decision. *"Another thirty will join the efforts to clamp down on this crime wave."*
"Dathomir will add our forty youth in hopes of aiding the galaxy."
Cal Omas bowed his head gratefully. "*Thank you, Jedi. I swear that if I am ever able to make it up to your Order, I will."*
"It will still require a month or two of coordinating these new Jedi and maneuvering others to new assignments," Kyle Katarn said, his forehead scrunched in thought. *"And that's if things don't change drastically in that time."*
"Any coordination on Ossus' part will be handled by Master Solusar," Cilghal said, motioning to the Jedi at her side. "As you all know, I will be stepping down from the High Council at the end of the month. I have decided, and he has agreed, that Master Solusar will take my place as the representative from the Ossus Praxeum."
"We'll look forward to working with you, Kam," Kyle voiced.
"Likewise, Kyle."
"Now that that matter of business is finished. Let's move on to the next topic in the agenda..."
{-[VII]-} {-[VII]-}
The High Council's decision had resounding affects across the Jedi Order, and not just tactically, but emotionally as well. At Ossus specifically, a hive of activity was stirred up as instructors and older

students were prepared to go out into the greater galaxy. Only a day had passed since the decision, but shuttles were constantly arriving and departing, from the early morning hours into late at night. The smiles and warmth of the praxeum had vanished as a somber atmosphere took over. Things had just gotten serious, and the nervous anticipation of the young apprentices and knights being sent out permeated the Force no matter where one walked.

With the addition of Barv and the older instructors leaving for a mission of their own, and the classes of older students being emptied to support the Jedi in the field, Ossus was fast becoming an empty shell.

"I've never seen the praxeum this busy," Kani whispered in a low voice, her amethyst eyes tracking a group of older students. All of them carried travel-bags and were forming up to board a recently arrived shuttle.

From their vantage point on a branch of towering Yuuzhan Vong-grown tree, Ben nodded. "I know. It's like a military academy or something, and it's hurting my mom and dad."

"Think the masters will have missions for us?"

"We're only ten."

"Azil is only fourteen and he's leaving tomorrow."

Ben fell silent at that. His mother had always told him that he would have his time, that despite the rot being printed in the various holo-mags, the galaxy didn't need another Skywalker just yet. But at times like this, he wondered just when that time would be. Would the galaxy wait until he was a full grown adult to have need of another Skywalker, or would he be just like his cousins and be forced into action at fourteen or fifteen years old?

Already he had been forced to deal with a couple of overeager HoloNet reporters who wanted the 'inside-scoop' on the next leader of the Jedi Order. A game of tag had turned into 'an ability to show great leadership,' in the holomags. When Kani had been missing her parents and he hugged her, an intrepid reporter caught the act on camera and declared Kani the 'next Mrs. Skywalker,' much to both of their embarrassment and humiliation. They weren't able to face each other for an entire month after *that* article had come out. Of course his parents had been furious at the reporters, especially when they tried to interview a then six year old Janek.

Despite his mom and dad's best efforts, Ben could definitely feel the pressure, the feeling that the galaxy was looking at he and Janek and hoping for something great. He tried not to think about it, but it was moments like this when he was reminded that he was no ordinary ten

year old Jedi. That someday, he'd be leading the Order against the galaxy's latest crisis.
And when it all came too much, he and Kani would retreat to their special spot just outside the praxeum grounds. The tree they were in was part of a small grove of plants that he and Kani had designated as 'their spot,' a place to just hang out and talk. Where they could just be kids climbing trees or swimming in the nearby lake.
One of the reasons why he didn't hang out with the older students too much was because many of them treated him as 'Jedi Skywalker,' and not just Ben. He wanted friends, not followers. Wanted to be around people because they saw him for who he wanted to be seen as, not because he was famous and going to be the next Grandmaster. At least Janek's friends and those around his age weren't yet indoctrinated by the media or preconceived beliefs about the greatness that was the Skywalker name.
It was also why he was such great friends with Kani. She couldn't care less about his last name, and the adventures they had had together had definitely created a very real bond, a friendship that couldn't be faked.
He couldn't help but admire how smart and brave she was. Though she was almost as powerful as him in the Force, she preferred to use her mind to work problems out rather than 'cheat' by using the Force. And when a HoloNet reporter managed to corner her for an interview, she gave one; just full of outrageous things that sounded like facts but were so completely off the mark it was utterly hilarious. The two of them, as well as the entire praxeum, had had a good laugh over the resulting 'inside exclusive' that was later published and republished. As far as the galaxy knew, he liked Gamorean cuisine, dancing and singing from the top of the praxeum arch-ways, and ordering the Jedi Masters of the praxeum about to set slavish schedules for the young students.
"You're leaving tomorrow too, right? For your cousin's baby." Kani's voice shook him from his thoughts.
"Yeah," Ben said softly.
"The academy is going to be so much emptier," Kani bowed her head and gripped one of her forearms, once again trying to be strong. "I already hate the way the hallways echo."
"You'll have Cappricia to keep you company. Besides, you hate my guts, remember?"
"Yeah," Kani replied with no energy, staring at her feet as she absently kicked them back and forth.

Ben closed his eyes, turning to the Force for guidance. If there was one thing he hated in his friendship with her, it was feeling Kani distressed in any way. Like most war orphans, she had been through enough, and he couldn't help but feel a small amount of protectiveness towards her. An idea suddenly came to him. "Hey, if you want, you can come with me and my family to Hapes."

Apparently the Force was kind to him because her head immediately jerked up, a flare of life returning to her gaze as she looked at him with a hopeful smile. "Really?"

"I'll ask mom, but she'll probably let you," Ben nodded.

Kani's entire face brightened, her smile radiant. She quickly scooted over to him and hugged him tightly. "Thanks!"

"Yeah," Ben felt his face flush, awkwardly returning the hug. Maybe the Force was playing tricks on him after all.

"I'll get my bag packed," Kani said promptly. "See you later!"

She pushed herself off the branch, using the Force to soften her landing. With another happy wave towards him, she took off running towards the academy.

Ben, completely bemused, scratched his head in confusion. How could a simple invitation make someone so happy? He didn't think he'd ever understand girls.

Maybe his dad could help.

Following Kani's example, he leaped out of the tree and landed in the soft dirt below. His dad would normally be teaching the older initiates about different lightsaber forms at the moment. Normally, until the call-to-arms had gone up and the Galactic Alliance repurposed most of those students to serve a greater need. If he concentrated, he could feel his dad's disquiet at having such an empty classroom.

Deciding that his dad's spirits needed lifting, and that he could solve his girl troubles at the same time, Ben took the short walk over to the praxeum and the training rooms used by the instructors.

"Dad," Ben said brightly.

"Ben." He could see his dad's face break out into a genuine smile. Ben inwardly cheered, half his goal was complete.

"Sorry for interrupting your class," Ben gestured to the two students—out of the normal fifteen that would have filled the room—seated before his dad.

"Not a problem. You know Yantahar and Vaala, right?"

Grinning at the Bothan and Arcona apprentices, Ben took a seat next to them. "Yup, I've seen them around."

"We've met," Yantahar agreed with a similar smile.

The two apprentices, normally partnered up, were older than Ben by seven years and ran in wholly different circles. Both were combat-orientated and fiercely loyal to the Jedi Order, and to Luke in particular, who had saved their lives when they had been younger. They were the alien big brother and sister Ben never had though, so they did exchange the odd conversation or so.
"Whatcha still doing on Ossus?" Ben asked. "I thought all the older Jedi were being deployed."
"Food poisoning," Vaala said dryly, rubbing her stomach.
"Terrible headache," Yantahar added, equally deadpan but taking on an ever-suffering expression.
Ben blinked, sensing no distress from either of them. He shot a glance to his father, who was doing his best to smother a proud grin.
"They wanted to make sure no one was going to take advantage of Ossus with most of the teachers and Knights spread out in the galaxy," Luke explained. "Cilghal couldn't sense anything wrong, but we didn't want to take any chances."
"Oh," Ben blinked. "So even big kids can still fake being sick?"
"Don't follow our examples, we're terrible Jedi," Vaala said quickly.
"Yes," Yantahar nodded, and in a stage whisper added. "I'm sure that once your wise father realizes we're not actually sick, he'll punish us by assigning us guard duty while the rest of our peers get to gallivant through the galaxy."
"He's incredibly cruel like that. I feel sorry that you and your brother have him as a father," Vaala finished.
"So, Ben, did you want something?" Luke chuckled tiredly.
"Uh huh," Ben said. "I'm not sure you can help me though."
"He used to be the Grandmaster of the Jedi Order," Yantahar interjected. "There's very little he can't do."
"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Luke said. "Like they said, I can probably help. Is it Force related?"
"Kind of, I guess?"
"'Kind of?'"
Ben took a deep breath as he marshaled his courage. It helped that the two apprentices seemed to realize that this was a 'family moment' and cleared out. Finally, the young ten year old met his dad's eyes and asked one of the questions most fathers both feared but anticipated. Even the former Grandmaster of the Jedi Order was no exception to this. Indeed, Luke could hear Mara laugh in the back of his mind as he froze in terror at the question.
"Dad, what do you know about girls?"

Such was the greatest plight of the Hero of the Rebellion, Savoir of the Jedi Order, and former Jedi Grandmaster. And for some reason, he mused—between his wife's mental laughter, his own panic, and Ben's confusion—he was more than okay with it.
{-[Chapter End]-}

Jaina
{-[I]-} {-[I]-}
Brandy brown eyes opened, peering through the darkened room with a tenderness that their owner hadn't allowed to exist for a very long time. In the seven years since the war, Jaina Solo had spent her time not running around the galaxy smiting evil-doers and chasing down pirates, but in the far reaches of the Chiss Ascendancy as the Jedi Order's official ambassador. She was tasked with helping the Ascendancy recover from the war, and to be on alert for any possible extra-galactic threat that might want to sneak on in through the Unknown Regions.
It had been a time full of healing. The lack of constant death, destruction, and fearing for one's friends, had been a welcomed reprieve after the Yuuzhan Vong War had consumed much of her teenage years. Equally welcomed was the time her job allowed her to spend with her boyfriend, which had evaporated much of the edge and tension she had developed over the course of the previous war.
She was happy, almost blissfully so. With Jagged Fel the Assistant Syndic of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Forces, his job and hers meshed perfectly. He commanded the fleets to safeguard the Ascendancy and repel threats such as the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium and the Vagaari—not that they needed repelling, as they had been relatively quiet since the war—and she went along as an adviser to keep the Galactic Alliance and Jedi Order apprised of the latest events.
There was nothing like exploring the unknown reaches of space in your X-wing, with your boyfriend in his Clawcraft at your side. She had been to all sorts of strange and wondrous worlds, met a diverse array of species not found in the known galaxy; from the reptilian Eickarie, to the insectoid Quesoth and leech-like Lugubraa, and more. She'd seen forests of towering crystal formations, rivers of plasma, and sights she'd never thought possible. She had raced her boyfriend through a star system cloaked entirely in a massive nebula, camped out in a canyon that stretched across a planet's equator, and witnessed stars dying and being born. She had even spent a full month exploring a ship graveyard full of all sorts of ancient tech over an ocean planet that had the remains of even more ships and temples to a long-lost civilization.

It had been one adventure after another, fun times and a great way to unwind.

Of course, she was a Jedi *and* a diplomat of a foreign government, so her posting was not all fun and kisses. It was also because of their jobs that neither of them had advanced their relationship to another level—or had any children together either. The Chiss Ascendancy had remained separate from the Galactic Alliance after the war, which posed a couple problems for Jaina and Jagged.

Owing to the fact that both were high-level officials and representatives of their own, separate governments, it wouldn't have been proper for either of them to make their relationship 'official' without causing some sort of diplomatic incident and a questioning of loyalties. Jagged Fel's loyalty and duty was to the Chiss Ascendancy, Jaina's was to the Jedi and the Galactic Alliance, and they were still as married to their jobs as they had been during the Yuuzhan Vong War. If they wanted to take their relationship any further, one of them had to step down, or the situation had to change drastically.

Jaina Solo gently pulled the silken white sheets around her bare form and slid out of the bed when she spotted who she was looking for.

"Hard at work again?" Jaina whispered, making her way over to him.

Assistant Syndic Jagged Fel was seated behind a wooden desk, clad in only a loose pair of sweatpants. He was reading through several datapads in the dim glow provided by a small glow-lamp, the contents provoking a scowl on his face. "You've been at those datapads all last night too."

"Apologies, I did not mean to wake you," Jagged said with a tired sigh, accepting the kiss Jaina leaned in to give.

"You didn't wake me, Jag," Jaina murmured, drawing back. "It was your absence that woke me. I've gotten used to having you by my side you know."

"As I, you," Jagged nodded, throwing the datapads down in exasperation.

"What's wrong?" Jaina gently began kneading his tense shoulders, using the Force to aid in her endeavors.

Jagged groaned aloud, closing his eyes as he answered. "You are aware that since the ending of the Yuuzhan Vong War, the Ascendancy has not ceased its production of Star Destroyers, frigates, and fightercraft?"

"How could I not?" Jaina grimaced. "I had quite a lot of people sending angry questions my way last year when the Ascendancy annexed half of the systems in the Velcar sector, and all of the systems in the Prefsbelt sector from the Remnant. The citizens in all of those affected

systems, however, all voted to join the Ascendancy, so there was little I could do but lodge an official complaint. I thought the Chiss had that Non-Aggression Law that forbade them from acts of provocation?"
"You know as well as I do that the Ascendancy has a tendency to split words. The Ascendancy simply presented itself as being better capable of defending and caring for the people in those sectors," Jagged said, wryly. "The added ships in our fleet most definitely helped in that regard, but it's not an act of aggression if we're offering safety and shelter that the Remnant cannot guarantee. At least, that is the Chiss reasoning."
"Well the Ascendancy *did* emerge from the war in much better state than the Remnant," Jaina said. "So I can see the allure in jumping ship. Apart from angry diplomats and military people, is there something else?"
"Possibly."
"Gut feeling?"
"Yes," Jagged nodded. "The latest materiel appropriations decided upon by High Command has increased military spending once more. In two more years, the Ascendancy wishes to be able to field five separate fleets built around ten Star Destroyers each. This is in addition to the two seven-Star Destroyer fleets we are already operating with, and the forces of the Colonial and Household Phalanxes. Recruitment into the military is at an all-time high, even when we are supposedly at peace-time. The additions of Yaga Minor and the former Imperial Territories have only increased the resources and manpower at our disposal. Again this is justified within the Non-Aggression Law because technically these ships would be a deterrent and not an offensive force."
"'Not an offensive force?'" Jaina repeated in disbelief. "What in the kriff would they need seventy-plus Star Destroyers for?"
Jagged seemed hesitant as he glanced at Jaina. "I am aware of some of their plans, Jaina. But will you forgive me if orders prevent me from sharing them? I have already revealed too much as it is."
Jaina let out a long breath. "Yeah. I'll still have to tell the Jedi Order about the planned build up, though. I hope your leaders know what they are doing. When the Remnant learns of this build up so soon after losing those sectors, they're going to probably assume the worst. If you're not careful, the buildup could very well spark another war."
"I am aware of that," Jagged replied tiredly. "And I have tried to reason with my superiors. But the Nuruodo Aristocra and Syndic believe that the Chiss need to be ready for any future war, and that a large enough fleet will be a deterrent enough for anyone who wishes to attack us."

"It's times like this when I really hate my job," Jaina muttered, shaking her head. She reached down and tugged on Jagged's hand once more. "Come back to bed, Jag. It's still late. We can question the sanity of your superiors another time."
Jagged's eyes lingered on hers for a long second, torn between duty and his girlfriend.
Sensing the conflict, Jaina let the sheet she had around her puddle to the ground.
The decision was fairly simple; warm, very attractive and unclothed girlfriend, or cold and unfeeling datapads that brought only headache-inducing news. The peace and quiet they were currently enjoying was hard enough to come by as it was, so Jagged wisely made his choice. He stood with a low growl and pulled Jaina against him possessively, crushing his lips against her own in a searing kiss.
"Are you trying to seduce me, Jedi Solo?" Jagged murmured when they parted, green eyes dark as he pressed her against a nearby bulkhead and slid a leg between her own.
"I don't need to try, Assistant Syndic," Jaina replied coquettishly, spinning them around so that it was Jagged against the bulkhead, her body pressed against his.
The two lovers walked themselves backwards back to the bed, and for the rest of the night, the Ascendancy's troubles were forgotten in much more pleasant lustful haze.
{-[II]-} {-[II]-}
The repeated chime of an incoming intercom call awoke both lovers with a trio of annoying chirps. Groaning, Jagged Fel reached across the pleasantly nude body of his girlfriend and gripped the offending comlink grumpily. "This is Assistant Syndic Fel."
"Assistant Syndic, sorry if I was interrupting anything, but you are needed on the bridge."
Jagged glanced back at his girlfriend, who was already in the process of sliding out of bed and grabbing her clothes. She must have used her Jedi intuition. Exhaling, he sat up. "Very well Colonel, I'll be there shortly. Assistant Syndic, out." He put down his comlink and caught the pants and shirt that Jaina tossed over to him. "Well, Ambassador Solo. Do your Jedi senses tell you anything else?"
"Colonel Irolia was angry," Jaina remarked. "Even for a Chiss."
Eyebrows rose, it took a lot to anger his second-in-command. "Then it appears I am *really* needed on the bridge. An angry Irolia is never a good thing."
The two showered and dressed in record time, somehow managing to avoid the 'just had a passionate night of lovemaking' look when they

stepped out of their quarters. They were onboard Jagged's flagship, the Chiss Mark II Star Destroyer *Eternal Dynast*, currently between duties in orbit above Csilla. Both strode through the corridors exuding purpose and power—an ace pilot and leader of the CEDF, and an experienced Jedi Knight and warrior—the Chiss they passed instantly snapping a salute. The two of them cut quite a figure, with Jag in his crisp white uniform and military-style bearing, and Jaina in her Jedi robes and an aura of authority that came with being a Jedi.

Over the past few years they had gained the respect and loyalty of the hundreds of thousands of CEDF personnel who served under them, something that might have seemed impossible for a human-born Assistant Syndic. But Jaina and Jagged had accomplished it nonetheless, running the fleets with exemplary Chiss-like precision, but using innovative tactics to get the job done.

The turbolift to the bridge was quick, and soon they were stepping out into the command and control center of the powerful Star Destroyer, tucked away in the center of the ship.

"Report," Jagged said gruffly.

"Assistant Syndic," Colonel Irolia saluted sharply. The source of the anger Jaina had sensed was clear. Standing next to Irolia was an older Chiss woman with a noble air, and a scarred and rugged-looking bodyguard who appeared to be only a few years younger than his charge. "This is Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo, she goes by her core name, Veeren. And this is her escort and bodyguard."

Showing none of the surprise he felt, Jagged saluted with the same professionalism the Chiss were known for. "Aristocra."

"Assistant Syndic," the woman inclined her head. As Aristocra, she had the authority to represent all of the Ascendancy and was one of the leaders of the Nuruodo family. It went without saying that she outranked him by an incalculable amount. Unfortunately, it also went without saying that his popularity didn't extend to the upper echelons in the Chiss command structure. "For a human, I appreciate the efforts you have taken to see to it that my daughter is a model of what House Nuruodo strives to be. Despite outside influences, she is an exemplar officer in our navy."

"Hess'irolia'nuruodo is a fine officer, Aristocra, and I am fortunate to have her under my command," Jagged replied evenly. "What is it that the CEDF can do for you, Aristocra?"

"I would request that you take me to the Imperial Remnant for diplomatic negotiations. To Bastion specifically," Sev'eere'nuruodo answered succinctly. "Several more of their systems wish to join the

Ascendancy, and while we have no objections, we do not want the Remnant to…shall we say…gain the wrong impression of us."
"With all due respect, Aristocra, would not this job be better suited for the remnants of House Chaf? Aristocra Chaf'orm'bintrano is the head of the Ascendancy's diplomatic corps and they have been successful in their negotiations in the past; the windfall of Imperial territories being one of them. Would not having the commander of the Ascendancy's armed forces…"
"Assistant Syndic Fel, you have your orders," Veeren said, the impatience in her tone clear. "Now will you take myself and my bodyguard to the Imperial Remnant, or will I have to relieve you of your command?"
"Not necessary, Aristocra," Jagged replied, his voice emotionless. The rest of the bridge crew was pretending to *not* watch the exchange and the dressing down of their commanding officer. "Helm, break orbit and set a course for the Remnant."
"I will be in the guest suite until then," Veeren said with a false smile. "You will inform me when we arrive, of course."
"Yes, ma'am."
"Come, Kung'urama'nuruodo," Veeren gestured to her silent bodyguard, and the two left the bridge.
"Apologies, sir," Irolia said in a low voice, head bowed, and visibly trembling with anger.
"None necessary, Colonel," Jagged said smoothly, his voice not as biting as when he had addressed the Aristocra. He clasped one of her shoulders supportively. "You are your own person, and the Aristocra is hers."
"Thank you," Irolia swallowed. "She must expect trouble though if she's bringing Spiker along."
"Her bodyguard, he's Force sensitive," Jaina noted.
"Worst kept secret of House Nuruodo," Irolia remarked, glaring at the doors of the turbolift. "He's a Jedi of the Republic era. Survived the Purge because he was working undercover for them among the Hutts, trying to see if the Hutts were going to ally with the Confederacy. When the Empire was finally pushed back into their little corner of the galaxy, he made his way to Ascendancy space and the Aristocra took him on. She uses him to intimidate the other houses and Aristocras."
Jaina's eyebrows rose at the story. "He must have been through a lot."
"Most definitely," Irolia agreed. She turned back to Jagged. "Sir, with your permission, I can have the rest of our fleet group meet us at the Imperial-Ascendancy border. They're currently stationed at the Marquarra system."

"Go ahead," Jag said gruffly. "We're going to need them."
"Jag?" Jaina said in a low voice as Irolia moved to a nearby cluster of officers to relay the orders.
"Nothing good will come of this meeting, Jaina. I may need your abilities as a Jedi negotiator to help ensure cooler heads prevail."
"Expecting trouble?"
"Sending an Aristocra of House Nuruodo to a diplomatic negotiation involving planets that the Ascendancy is on the verge of annexing is akin to the Galactic Alliance sending General Antilles and an entire fleet group for negotiations of a similar nature," Jagged replied grimly. "There is a reason why House Nuruodo commands a majority of the Chiss navy, and why they have been a Ruling Family for a very, very long time. Though there are other Ruling Families, it is Nuruodo who has the most say in foreign and local policy making, and dictates where the Ascendancy will place their next colonies. Their power was once checked by House Chaf, but House Chaf is no longer as strong as they had once been, so there has been no one else to limit the actions of House Nuruodo. Their policies are gradually becoming that of the Ascendancy's. This is all the more apparent due to the fact that Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo despises anyone not of Chiss heritage, and is all for abolishing the Non-Aggression Law."
"Just great," Jaina groaned. "So why are you having Irolia bring more ships with us then?"
Now it was Jagged's turn to grimace. "The Aristocra has forced my hand. If things go wrong and we are ill-prepared for it, we may very well be the first casualties in a new war. At least this way the Imperials will give it some thought before opening fire on us."
"That optimistic about our chances?"
"This is as optimistic as you will see me," Jagged answered with a quirk of an eyebrow.
"I'll get in touch with my Imperial counterpart then," Jaina said with a rueful shake of her head. "Maybe she can give me a small briefing on the state of things over there."
"Any help would be appreciated. The official position of the Ascendancy is that we will not hesitate to give aid to those who need it if we are capable of doing so. The Remnant refuses to help the non-humans on these worlds, so we are obligated as any decent being would be, to aid the planets that wish to join the Ascendancy."
"I'll pass that along," Jaina said. "I'll be in my quarters if you need me."
{-[III]-} {-[III]-}
Jaina took a seat in her fairly roomy quarters; which, despite the fact it was rarely used, had actually been custom-built just for her. When

Jag's flagship was being constructed, the Assistant Syndic of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Forces had ensured that not only would a Jedi Meditation chamber be included, but that Jaina would have all the comforts the Chiss could provide. Unlike the cold metal walls that existed in most Chiss quarters, hers were wood-lined. She had an actual bed instead of a military-issued bunk, and her own personal, encrypted, hypercomm unit. A walk-in shower, leather chairs, and a variety of other comforts made the place seem more like a luxury apartment room than quarters aboard a military vessel.

Jag of course justified all this by pointing out that Jaina was not only a war hero, but was a representative of a vaunted and powerful order, and that she should be shown the highest level of respect and comfort. He pointed to her service record, as well as the fact that she had been present during the Yuuzhan Vong invasion of Chiss space, and the fact that her advice and insight had literally saved the Ascendancy from certain annihilation. He then elaborated, slightly embellishing, on the benefits of having a powerful Jedi onboard the flagship of the Chiss navy, and how her foresight would be of use in warding off future threats.

He got his wish.

She got her room.

Jaina smiled whimsically as she started up her computer console. He never ceased in making her feel like the goddess she had pretended to be during the war. She wasn't sure if it was an abuse of his power or not, but if it wasn't hurting anyone, she definitely wasn't going to complain.

"Scramble code eleven-alpha-two-beta," Jaina recited, taking a moment to breathe deeply in front of the comm-unit. Annexing another sector, building a fleet, the Chiss seemed well on their way to self-destructing, well on their way to provoking another war, and she desperately hoped the upcoming negotiations wouldn't blow up in their faces. "Connect to the Jedi Ambassador to the Imperial Remnant."

There was a moment of static, and then the image of her desired contact appeared on the holoscreen. Long golden blond hair swept up into a bun, gray-green eyes, and sharp aristocratic features, Turi Altamik had been chosen to be the Jedi Ambassador to the Imperial Remnant not only because she was human, but because her parents were politicians and she knew best how to navigate the thorny complications created by the varying Imperial Moffs all vying for prominence. She was two years younger than Jaina, but in light of the Yuuzhan Vong War, that didn't really mean much. All of the younger Jedi had been forced to grow up fast, and Turi was no exception.

"*Jaina, what can I do for you?"* Turi greeted with a tired, yet mischievous smirk, her accent as Imperial as the crest on the wall behind her.
"That's such a loaded question, Turi."
"*This call wouldn't have anything to do with the mobilization of the Imperial fleets, would it?"*
Jaina let the front of her head touch the top of her desk in exasperation.
"*I thought as much. I'm trying to calm nerves over here, but the political power no longer resides with Bastion and Moff Sarreti."*
"Oh?" Jaina had only recently returned to Chiss space a year earlier after a three-year excursion into the Unknown Regions; just in time for the Tion Hegemony mess. When she had last left, the political situation in the Remnant had been dicey at best. The Moffs had been in a free-for-all as they fought for political power and influence. Evidently, one of the Moffs had finally won out.
"*Grand Moff Voster Quille, of the Dynali Sector, is the new political heavyweight. With Bastion still rebuilding, Taspir has become the Empire's official capitol."*
"And that means Quille has a whole bunch of new friends," Jaina concluded.
"*Yes. Unfortunately these new friends control much of the Imperial navy and are about as xenophobic as the best of the Empire can be. It's actually a good thing you called. Here, I'll forward you one of the political adverts filling the airways. If you can believe it, it's one of the milder ones."*
Turi's image retreated to a small corner of the screen as the propaganda played. A rousing march promptly sounded as a fleet of Star Destroyers and TIE Fighters filled the rest of the screen. The view zoomed into the hangar bay of a Super Star Destroyer, where battalions of stormtroopers and Imperial officers stood in formation. As the camera slowly panned over the seemingly endless ranks, a voice in the most Imperial of accents began to narrate.
"*This is what the Empire stands for. Strength. Discipline. Order. We are an Empire of many, independent and bowing to no one. Alien invaders tried to destroy our spirit, non-humans still seek to tear our Empire apart, but we will resist, we will prevail. The Yuuzhan Vong met their match against the best of our great Empire. Chiss too <u>will</u> learn to respect us, will see that the Empire is superior to their feeble minds. It is time we return to the old ways, the values which made us even stronger. It is time that this great Empire stretch out across the galaxy and is given the respect it deserves."*

The holo-image showed gleaming cities, Coruscant in its prime, images of Rebel Alliance starships and bases being destroyed. Humans laughing, enjoying the high life. Stormtroopers marching through cities in triumphant parades.

"*The men and women of our fighting forces are ready to do their part. They are ready to stand up against the non-humans of this galaxy who would see that we bow to their every whim. What about you? Sign up today in the Imperial Navy and together we'll bring the Empire into a new era. Standing side by side with the other loyal citizens of this great government, we shall emerge from the ashes, and the galaxy shall know our resolve. Together we shall make our mark in galactic history, together we shall restore to our great government what the touch of alien races tried to corrupt. A new dawn is breaking, and with it comes the birth of the Third Imperium.*"

Turi's image filled the screen again and the blond Knight nodded at Jaina's slack-jawed expression. "*My thoughts exactly. The issue of moving the non-humans to Bastion so they'll be out of the way has resurfaced more times than I'd like. Unfortunately, I have a mandate to observe only. We Jedi are supposed to be neutral so long as galactic peace isn't threatened.*"

"Have they started rounding up non-humans or anything?"

"*No. They're just filling the airways with that drivel and letting the bereaved masses take matters into their own hands. Recruitment for the Imperial military has increased five-hundred percent, and a new shipyard has just opened up on Taspir itself. Over seventy-percent of the Empire's human youth have joined up, with the older adults swelling the auxiliary roles just as fast. I think the Chiss have provided just the focus Quille and his allies were looking for to unite the Empire. Human-purity versus an alien-run government that tries to be human, is the perfect mix to rally everyone. It's definitely working too. The Imperial Navy itself is nearly twice that what it was pre-war, and more shipyards are opening up as more and more sectors decide to rejoin the Empire.*"

"So that's why they haven't made any real diplomatic efforts to reclaim the Prefsbelt and Valc sectors," Jaina said slowly. "They want to use them as justification for a war. A motivating tool for the rest of the Empire."

"*They've never really lost their siege mentality since the war,*" Turi concurred. "*And with Grand Admiral Pellaeon occupied more with Galactic Alliance matters as its Supreme Commander, his influence is negligible at best. Moff Sarreti is politically impotent, the loss of*

Bastion and its human population being blamed on him, and much of his sector is already loyal to Grand Moff Quille."
"You do know that I called hoping for some good news," Jaina said faintly.
"*None over here, unfortunately. Well, maybe there is one bit of good news. Grand Moff Quille has somehow secured the resources and supplies to care for several billion people. I don't know where he got the food stuffs and medical equipment, but a part of his rise is due to the fact that he <u>can</u> singlehandedly provide for pretty much all of the Empire's displaced non-human population. It's only a question of wanting to."*
"Alright thanks for the update. I can probably answer a few questions you have as well. Unlike last time, the Ascendancy is using House Nuruodo for the upcoming negotiations. Their stance on the systems they annexed is that they are blameless in the matter since its people all voted to join the Ascendancy. The same will be said for those about to vote on the matter."
"*Blast it! If those systems vote to join the Ascendancy, there's no stopping a war. Is there any way you can convince the Ascendancy to back off their support? Tell them that the Empire is fully capable of caring for those people with the supplies obtained by Quille. Something! I've only marginal support from the more extreme Moffs, who just so happen to be the ones in power. If you get the Chiss to back off, I can do the same with the Moffs."*
"I'll do my best, Turi," Jaina breathed. "For now, you can let the Moffs know that I'll be with the diplomatic delegation so that they don't have to open fire immediately."
"*Roger that. See you at Bastion, Jaina."*
"I hope this will have an ending that doesn't involve things blowing up and people dying," Jaina replied sardonically.
"*That makes two of us. Jedi Knight Turi Altamik, out."*
{-[IV]-} {-[IV]-}
"Emerging from hyperspace, now." The Chiss officer called out. The cone of blue and white vanished, replaced by a field of black with glittering stars.
And an entire Imperial fleet sitting in front of Bastion.
"Assistant Syndic, they have fifteen capital ships and several wings of fighters in battle formation!" A sensor officer said in alarm.
"Hold position," Jag said curtly. It was a tense standoff, with the eight Chiss Star Destroyers and their frigate support group staring down the gleaming cruisers fielded by the Remnant.
"Receiving communications from the flag *Empire's Glory*."

"Put them through."
"*Ascendancy forces. You will be allowed to land a single shuttle full of diplomatic personnel on Bastion for the negotiations. Should any of your ships advance a single lightsecond further, it will be considered an act of aggression and you <u>will</u> be fired upon."*
"Understood. We will disembark shortly."
Jag motioned to Irolia. "You have the bridge, Colonel. Should anything go wrong your orders are to return to Ascendancy space. You are *not* to engage the Imperials. Am I clear?"
"Yes, sir."
Jaina exchanged a private nod with the Chiss colonel. They had formed a bond, a friendship even, during the course of the Yuuzhan Vong War, and that friendship had continued even after the war had ended. Both were dedicated to a certain Assistant Syndic's well-being, as well as to their individual duties, and had teamed up on more than one occasion during their surveys of the Unknown Regions.
Over the course of their friendship, Jaina had come to appreciate Irolia's very un-Chiss-like selective hearing. Where the woman would interpret orders as she saw fit to see to the safety of those with her, regardless of the danger such an action placed on herself, or the disciplinary actions she received afterwards. Jag also seemed to appreciate the independent thinking Irolia was capable of, and made her the third member of their shield-trio when they went exploring in their fighters.
"Jedi Ambassador Solo, if you would accompany me to the Aristocra's quarters. We should inform her that we have arrived."
Minutes later, Jaina, Jag, and the Aristocra and her bodyguard, were piled up into the shuttle and gliding through the Imperial fleet formation. Squadrons of TIEs screamed all around them, flying dangerously close or buzzing them with their engine wash. The Aristocra's lips thinned at the display, but for the most part, she remained silent.
Bastion had changed drastically in the aftermath of the Yuuzhan Vong War. Where it had once been the pride and joy of Imperial civilization, it was for all intents and purposes, a ghost planet. The anti-human virus unleashed by Domain Vorrik had decimated a population that had been ninety-five percent human. Entire cities stood empty, skylanes full of speeders that had stopped in their tracks. Holo-signs flickered on and off without any viewers, WALL-class mobile trash-compactor droids continued to absently go about their programming, and the few non-human residents did their best to eke out an existence in an Empire

now jealous and furious of their survival. The planet was quarantined so they couldn't leave even if they wanted to.
Much of the planet still remained uninhabitable for humans, Yuuzhan Vong shapers unable to find a cure to the virus even seven years on. The virus had been a weapon meant to kill, and had been made fairly impervious to counters. Added to the fact that it had mutated over the years, and the shapers were constantly forced to start from scratch. The population of twenty-six million humans that did live on the planet did so in specially designed environmental shells, the ground the structures had been built on scorched at temperatures even the virus couldn't survive. Twenty-six million, from what had once been a human population of six billion. The planet was a remnant of a remnant, a shadow of what it had once been.
Jaina found it hard to look out the viewport as the shuttle passed through a mag-con field at the top of the domed shelter that sat on the outskirts of the city of Ravelin. The city itself still existed nearby, but like a ghastly tomb; the gleaming black monument of the Imperial Remnant headquarters was little more than a headstone to a once great empire. The survivors and transplanted refugees existed in the domed shelter, in one and two-story pre-fab shelters, living off rationed food and water and hanging onto the slim hope that Bastion would be great once again.
The shuttle touched down without incident, and the two Chiss and two humans stepped out onto the durasteel floor that lined the bottom of the domed shelter. A squadron of stormtroopers awaited them in two neat rows, standing at attention with their blasters clasped to their chests.
"Representatives of the Ascendancy, welcome," a junior officer greeted them, sounding anything but welcome. "If you will follow me, I'll take you to the Grand Moff and the members of the Imperial Diplomatic corps."
Jaina secretly raised an eyebrow at Jag, who likewise noted the veiled insult. Instead of greeting the high-ranking Chiss Aristocra personally, a mere lieutenant had been sent to 'fetch' her.
Sev'eere'nuruodo pasted a false expression of patience as she gestured to street-light illuminated path. "By all means, take us to the Moff."
They were led through a maze of pre-fab shelters and supply crates, traversing the entire domed city before they reached an artificial outdoor park. A single flimsplast table had been set up, with the Imperials on one side, and an empty row of seats on the other.

"Aristocra Nuruodo," a man in his early fifties gestured to the empty seats without standing. His uniform was as crisp as his haircut, and his eyes were sharp and almost predatory. "If you would, then we could get started."
Jaina noticed Turi standing behind the row of Moffs and diplomats visibly grimacing at the lack of respect being shown.
"It appears you have me at a disadvantage. I was expecting to deal with Moff Sarreti. Might I know who I am addressing?" Veeren said sharply.
"I am Grand Moff Voster Quille, negotiating on behalf of the Empire. Ephin Sarreti was recently removed from the Council of Moffs and his territory ceded to me."
Jaina again looked to Turi, who sent regret through the Force.
It happened the moment I got off the comm with you. Turi thought apologetically. *You know how quickly these political things happen. The signs were there, but yeah, I know what you mean.* Jaina empathized. *Any more surprises?*
Quille is a big enough surprise as it is. Be careful.
"You are no doubt aware of why we have come here," Sev'eere'nuruodo said. "The Ascendancy has no desire to go to war with the Imperial Remnant, but at the same time, we will not ignore the suffering of people if we are capable of helping them. We have received reports of widespread famine and a shortage of medical supplies, and the Ascendancy is more than capable of supplying both food and medicine to these systems. Should Cantras Gola and Valc vote to secede from the Imperial Remnant, the Ascendancy will welcome and care for their people as if they were our own. We will vigorously defend their rights and will not allow anyone to coerce them into making decisions against their will."
"The Empire does not wish for war either, but we cannot allow the secession to occur," Quille replied in an equally harsh tone. "Both Cantras Gola and Valc are longtime members of our great government, and we will not allow the pillars that make up our society to be undermined by outside forces. Unless you make it clear to these systems that, under no terms will you accept them into the Ascendancy, then you will leave the Empire with very little choice."
"Jedi Ambassador Solo has informed me that you are capable of taking care of the twelve billion people that live in these systems. Is this true?"
"Possibly. Our own Jedi Ambassador believes that you will back down once the well-being of those twelve billion people are assured."

"We are only interested in the systems due to the fact that they are on our border and in need of help. It is the people within them that allow us into their space, who want to join us."
"Here is the proposal from the Empire," Quille said succinctly. "You will inform the separatists in these systems that you will not support their petition to join the Ascendancy. In exchange, we will supply these planets with food and medical supplies."
"That is acceptable."
"In addition," Quille added sharply. "All Chiss forces are to vacate the Prefsbelt and Velcar sectors and return them to the Empire by no later than two standard days. Both are sovereign Imperial sectors and the mere presence of your forces is an affront to our people."
"That, I will have to disagree with, Grand Moff," Veeren said bitingly. "You already lost those systems all on your own. If they were sovereign territory, why then did they vote to join the Ascendancy?"
"They were misled by disgruntled political groups and those who wish to destabilize the Empire. At the time, the political control of the Empire was in the hands of Grand Admiral Pellaeon and then Moff Sarreti, and they had neither the resources nor time to help restore those sectors to their glory. A new era is dawning in the Empire, and now we are more than capable of caring for those loyal sons and daughters of the Empire. This isn't a request, Aristocra. The Ascendancy can either return those sectors to us, or we will take those sectors back by force if necessary."
"Chiss do not respond well to threats," Veeren growled.
"I am not threatening, I am promising. For too long have our neighbors looked down upon the Empire. Seen us as weak, crippled. That will not stand for much longer. You say you wish for peace, that your only interest in the sectors you have annexed is to see to it that their people are well cared for. Well, under my leadership the Empire *has* acquired the resources needed to care for them, so your help is no longer needed nor wanted. The Chiss no longer have a reason to be in Imperial space. Return the Prefsbelt and Velcar sectors, and encourage the separatists in the Cantras Gola and Valc systems to abandon their referendums, and you will have proven yourselves beings of your word. Failure to do so will only expose your hypocrisy and lies, but also your desire to covet Imperial territory, whether its people want to join you or not."
Sev'eere'nuruodo regarded the Grand Moff with an inscrutable red-eyed stare. Jaina and Jag shifted uncomfortably while trying to remain stoic, and Sev'eere'nuruodo's bodyguard remained as silent as ever.

It was obvious that Sev'eere'nuruodo was more than furious at having terms dictated to her, and was not going to agree to what Quille was proposing on matter of sheer principal. Even then, however, the Aristocra stayed silent. After a moment, Jaina realized that the bodyguard was in fact calling upon the Force and using it to communicate something to the enraged Aristocra.
"Very well," Sev'eere'nuruodo finally said tonelessly, easing tensions.
Jaina looked sharply to the bodyguard, whose face was unreadable. She had a feeling that even if House Chaf wasn't available to check the ambitions of House Nuruodo, at least *someone* was. "We will return the aforementioned territories to the Imperial Remnant on the condition that its people are cared for and face no repercussions for voting to join the Ascendancy. Additionally, the Ascendancy will remain blameless should those people again vote to secede."
"A wise choice, Aristocra," Quille praised, his voice a touch away from patronizing. "I will expect you to vacate the territories affected by no later than two standard days. The Empire will open fire or detain any Chiss vessel found in those regions after such time has elapsed."
The Aristocra inclined her head robotically, and the details of their agreement were put into writing. She had been expecting a wholly different outcome to the negotiations and was not too happy with the results.
Off to the side, Turi stood with Jaina, her expression guarded.
"Well, that couldn't have gone any better for Quille if he tried," Turi murmured.
"This lets him show he stared down the powerful Ascendancy, came out ahead with all of the lost territory, and with not a single shot fired," Jaina agreed. "If he had any doubters, this would get rid of them."
"Unfortunately for me," Turi said, her mouth barely moving. "I'm thinking about asking the Jedi Order to step in soon. The xenophobia and Palpatine-era doctrines being resurrected are seriously making me nervous."
"It's an internal matter though," Jaina said, seeing Turi's problem. "Unless they threaten others, we can't do a thing. We both know the Galactic Alliance is in no shape to enforce anything anyways, they're too caught up in their own problems."
"Get the feeling that this won't be the last time we see each other?" Jaina allowed a wry smirk. "Hope it doesn't have to be because these two sides come within a hairsbreadth of declaring war though."
"Tell me about it. My back and neck are so stiff, it's like I have a turtle shell," Turi breathed, absently rubbing the small of her back. "Jedi exercises definitely aren't meant for repeated political crises."

The deal between the two sides was completed, and the Aristocra stood.
"It has been a pleasure, Aristocra," the gloating in the Moff's words was clear.
"Indeed," Sev'eere'nuruodo said acidly. "Now if you don't mind, Grand Moff, we must return to the fleet and coordinate the movement of Chiss vessels out of the systems you indicated."
"By all means. The good lieutenant can show you back to your ship."
"Guess that's my cue to leave," Jaina murmured. "Take care, Turi."
"You too, Jaina. I'll call again if something else pops up."
"Force I hope not," Jaina groaned. "But knowing my luck, I'll keep the lines open."
{-[V]-} {-[V]-}
After two days of coordinating ship movements out of the recently ceded territories, the trip back to Chiss space was wholly uncomfortable. After getting her diplomatic rear handed to her, the Aristocra was not in the best of moods. She had expected to face down Moff Sarreti and force *him* to blink, much like he had done the last few diplomatic meetings between their two peoples. Instead, she was humiliated and forced to give up the newly gained territories pretty much at gun point. Though the Chiss were only just building their fleets, the Empire had been ready for a war right away. There was little else she could have done, especially with the Non-Aggression law binding her actions.
Rather, her supposed bodyguard had apparently gotten through to her in more subtle ways, definitely avoiding what could have been a disastrous meeting that would have played even more into Quille's hands.
"So," Jaina remarked, sitting down next to Sev'eere'nuruodo's bodyguard in the mess hall. "Your name was Kung'urama'nuruodo, right? Colonel Irolia tells me you were once part of the Jedi Order of the Republic."
"That was a long time ago," the over half-century old Chiss said, his voice thick. "Another life."
"I know what you mean," Jaina said sagely.
Kungurama stared at her for a moment, then blinked slowly. "I suppose you do, Jedi."
"Thank you, for intervening with the Aristocra."
"We all do our part for this galaxy, in our own ways," the older man replied simply, drinking from his cup. "War would not have been good for either party. This galaxy has seen too much of it as it is."
"If you don't mind me asking. I heard some of your story from Irolia…"

"You wish to know how I came to be with the Chiss, and why I serve her mother?"
"Yes."
"That, again, is a very long story."
"It's eight hours 'till we return to Csilla, I have the time," Jaina shrugged.
Kungurama's red eyes seemed to glimmer with amusement. Despite the heavy scars and age lines that marred his face, as well as his bulky, muscular form, Jaina could see cool intelligence in those eyes.
"Time. Something few of us have."
"I don't mean to pry."
"No, it is alright. I suppose someone should hear my story." The Chiss took another long swig from his cup, then frowned when he realized it was empty. He shrugged and set the cup aside, returning his attention to Jaina. "Listen well, young Jedi. There will come a time in your life when you will question all that you were brought up believing. Where the ideals you once valued most will become those that you will set aside with ease. I was much like you, forged in war, in combat. I believed I had a purpose, that what I was doing was right, was just. Sometimes, though, the galaxy calls for a different brand of justice. Sometimes, the lessons we are taught as children must be abandoned in order for us to survive. This galaxy is forever changing, and stale doctrines and set beliefs will quickly be the source of one's downfall if one cannot adapt. I did what had to be done so that some aspect of the Jedi will live on in me, but I am a Jedi no longer. Nor am I, however, a Sith. At one time I answered to the name of Kungurama, at another, Spiker. Who I am now is irrelevant in the grand scheme of things, I grew up not knowing my past, my origins, and when I rejoin the Force my past will be pointless. I returned to the Chiss, perhaps because I felt some kinship, or a desire to be among my people in my age, but stayed because I have seen how lost they have become. The strength that they had prided themselves in was no longer. The Ascendancy a pale shell of what it once was. I seek to turn that shell into a cocoon, an incubator from which a stronger Ascendancy will emerge. I have already lost much to the sin of stagnation, I will not lose my people to the same reason."
"Are you the one behind the recent pushes to expand the CEDF?"
"No," Kungurama shook his head slowly. "The only thing I have done is guide it so that the ships will help and not hurt. Sometimes that is all one can do. Not all problems can be solved. Not all opposition can be overcome. But if you seize control of it, make the problem work for

you, then the battle is won even if you haven't achieved things to your liking."
Jaina neutrally drank from her own cup, making no comment audible or otherwise.
"You disagree?"
"Not completely," Jaina said coolly. "But if you discard everything that makes you you, what are you left with?"
Kungurama smirked. "Think on my words, young Jedi. Perhaps, in time, you will see the truth in them. When we arrive on Csilla and the Aristocra and I depart, I do not think we will meet again, so remember my words well."
"Are all Jedi from your time so frustratingly cryptic and wise?"
This time the Chiss did laugh, nodding as he did. "We found it a way to past the time, I think. Keep your guard up, Jaina Solo. The Chiss and Remnant are far from done from each other, and you might be the only one capable of solving the matter in such a way so that the rest of the galaxy benefits from this friction."
"If I fail?"
"Then the galaxy will be engulfed in war and quite possibly be left in ruin." The large Chiss stood and carried his tray away, leaving Jaina alone at the table.
"Just great," Jaina sighed, picking at her food. "And I thought I had given up that 'galaxy saving' job when I came out here to the Ascendancy."
"Had an enlightening conversation, Ambassador?" Irolia took the vacated seat.
"You could say that."
"Kungurama is a lot smarter than he appears," Irolia said simply. "His ability to strategize rivals that of the famed Miith'raw'nuruodo, and his combat skills are unsurpassed. But few have seen either. He rather enjoys letting everyone believe he is the unintelligent muscle that follows my mother around."
"You could have warned me before I talked with him."
"Where would the fun be in that?" Irolia said, somehow speaking without breaking a smile.
"Eager to get to Csilla?"
"For more reasons than one," Irolia answered. "It is infuriating being the daughter of the Aristocra. I am more than grateful that the Assistant Syndic does not take the traditional Chiss views to my lineage. I have you to thank for that, I suppose. If it were not for you, the only thing that would separate my commander and a Chiss is skin color and eyes."

Recalling full well what Jag was like when she had first met him, Jaina shared a grin. "It was a pain. But he's worth the effort, I think."
There was a lurch as the ship dropped out of hyperspace.
"We're early," Irolia scowled, rising back to her feet. "We couldn't possibly have reached Csilla already."
"All hands report to ready stations. Lock down all unessential areas. The Eternal Dynast is now switching to status Omega. Repeat, we are on status Omega."
The rest of the Chiss in the dining hall all rose as one. Status Omega was one rank below the call to battle stations.
"The Imperials?" Irolia asked sharply, matching Jaina stride for stride as the hurried to the nearest turbolift.
"Can't be," Jaina shook her head. "They got what they wanted."
Both emerged onto the bridge to see Jag barking out orders to the command crew. Just outside the bridge, the two women could see one of the largest gatherings of Chiss vessels since the Yuuzhan Vong War.
"What's going on, Jag?" Jaina said quickly.
"The Ascendancy has come under attack," Jag replied tersely. "Three colonies just went dark, and the Colonial Phalanx military outpost at Colony Station Cam'co sent out a distress call before we lost contact with it. The Aristocra has given permission for the CEDF to ready for war."
"A war? Against whom?" Irolia asked.
"The Imperial Remnant of course," Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo said darkly. "They are the only ones with the motive and means to attack our holdings and get away with it."
"Are we certain it's them?" Jaina said urgently.
"We are," Veeren answered. "They have already sent a message accusing us of ransacking the systems in the Prefsbelt and Velcar sectors before leaving them. The nerve of them! After everything, they were just looking for an excuse to go to war after all."
"There has to be another explanation."
"Then, in your infinite wisdom, Jedi Solo, I am all ears," Veeren said patronizingly. "Tell me what other explanation can there possibly be? The Imperials have not disguised their disgust of the Ascendancy these past few years. Nor have they hidden their own military buildup and pro-human stances. They wished to make an issue of a non-issue, tried to force war by claiming that we deceived the systems that voted to secede from their failing government. They wish to unite their people, what better way to do so than against the Ascendancy?"
"Jedi Solo, the Ascendancy is not a part of the Galactic Alliance," Jagged said carefully, choosing his words as he balanced both his duty

to the Ascendancy and his feelings for his girlfriend. "If we were to be provoked, the rest of the Alliance would be obligated to come to the Empire's aid. It is a gamble with no risk to them."
"Well, Jedi Solo? Do we have the Order's approval to go to war?" Veeren said bitingly. "Or are we to just sit around and wait as our people are massacred?"
"Ambassador Solo! Receiving a transmission from your counterpart in the Remnant over the emergency communication's channel," Another officer announced.
Jaina quickly moved over to the terminal and activated it. "Turi, talk to me."
"*I was the one hoping for a clarification. Please tell me the Chiss weren't responsible for the massacres we found at Churruma and Ompersan? Or the poisoning of the water supplies of Yaga Minor and the razing of Presfbelt?"*
"The Chiss left those systems the moment the treaty with the Empire was signed," Jaina said urgently. "Has the Empire started an attack on the Ascendancy? They've lost contact with three colonies and a military garrison."
"*No! Grand Moff Quille is mobilizing the Imperial Navy to do just that though. I promise you, Jaina. The Empire hasn't launched any sort of attack just yet! If the Chiss are mobilizing too, call them off. I'll do what I usually do with these Moffs and see if I can't keep our sides from killing each other, again."*
"Understood, good luck."
"*You too. I'll be in touch shortly."*
Jaina straightened. "Well, Aristocra? Still think the Imperials are at fault?"
"They could be deceiving your counterpart."
"Lying to a Jedi is not something that's easy to do," Jaina replied logically. "Like I could tell you were just as shocked as Turi was when she described the atrocities that took place in the sectors the Ascendancy vacated. The Chiss weren't responsible for them, just as the Empire isn't responsible for these attacks. Someone wants the two of you to go to war."
"And who would this someone be?"
"I don't know," Jaina said. "But at the moment both the Empire and the Ascendancy are strong militarily. A war would decimate both sides and leave both sides vulnerable to this instigator. Call off your forces, Aristocra. That's my advice as the Jedi Ambassador to the Ascendancy."

Silence ticked by in an unnerving fashion as the Chiss armada outside the ship continued to mass. Finally Veeren relented. "Very well. Provided that the Imperials stand down as well, Assistant Syndic, you are to cease all hostilities or acts of provocation. Send the fleet to reinforce the other colonies. I expect a full investigation into this. If the Empire isn't responsible, I want to find who is. Assistant Syndic, Jedi Ambassador, this will be your assignment. Find out who wishes war, and make them pay for trying to make both our governments pawns."
"Understood," Jagged said, snapping off a salute.
Veeren glared at Jaina for a moment, before whirling around and disappearing into the turbolift.
Jaina leaned back over the communication's console. "Put me back in contact with the Imperial Jedi Ambassador."
"Yes ma'am."
"Turi, the Chiss are standing down."
"*We're still on high alert over here, but I barely managed to convince Quille to stand down as well. This incident is still being used as a rallying cry for Imperial purity, though, so things for non-humans have taken a turn for the worst. General Dorja of Imperial Naval Intelligence is being assigned the investigation into the events in the Prefsbelt and Velcar sectors."*
"Will the Imperials mind if we join in? A joint investigation should help to soothe both sides."
"*You got drafted too, huh?"*
"Ordered, drafted, yeah," Jaina exhaled in relief once more. That had been much too close. "We'll share our findings with you, if you return the favor."
"*Not a problem. Someone is going to great lengths to start a war. We need to find out who before this gets out of hand."*
"I know. We came one hyperspace jump from that," Jaina breathed. "I think we exhausted whatever luck we had."
"*I hope not. For all our sakes, I definitely hope not."*
{-[VI]-} {-[VI]-}
Jaina stepped out onto the Chiss Colonial Station Cam'co, her brown-eyed gaze taking in the destruction dispassionately. She had seen too much of it during the Yuuzhan Vong War, and the flashbacks such a desolate place caused were not welcomed in the slightest.
An isolated planet in an isolated system at the edge of Chiss space, the Colonial Station had once housed three thousand Chiss civilians and a garrison of five-hundred Colonial Phalanx soldiers.
Not a single one of those three-thousand five-hundred Chiss remained among the living. The buildings were flattened, and the once well-kept

terraced fields were pockmarked and scorched. Bodies lay where they had fallen, the military, but also the civilian. Women, children, no one was spared. The Colonial Station was a dead world. The worst part was that most of the bodies were barely recognizable, as if something had feasted on them and left behind a half-eaten head or limb.
"These craters are too imprecise to be from laser bombardment or torpedoes," Irolia noticed in a low voice as the investigative team began to fan out.
"And these Chiss weren't killed by blaster fire either," Jaina knelt by one of the more intact bodies on the landing pad of their shuttle. "Look, these are stab and cutting wounds."
"So unless the Imperials are using claws and swords now, someone else *is* responsible."
"Which isn't good either way," Jagged said gruffly, supervising the science teams. "A force that is capable of striking as fast as they did, laying waste to a Colonial Phalanx garrison in so quick a time that all the garrison could do was activate an emergency distress beacon, that is not a force that can be allowed to run freely."
"There's another thing that has me concerned," Jaina said, the trio walking through the streets of the shattered colony. "Where are all the bodies of the attackers? You can tell where some of the Chiss tried to make their stand, can see the blaster and maser scoring on the rocks and buildings. But there aren't any dead besides Chiss."
"The attackers could have taken the bodies with them," Irolia hypothesized. "To keep their identity hidden and to cast blame on the Imperial forces."
"If they planned that far ahead, why make it so obvious that the Chiss weren't killed by Imperial weapons?" Jaina asked, using the Force to scan the area. "This doesn't make sense. Without any scientific tests, even we could see that this wasn't an Imperial attack. Yet, these attacks had to have been planned to have been pulled off so flawlessly."
"What do you think our Imperial friends are discovering?" Irolia murmured.
"Much of the same, I suppose," Jagged answered, stopping to kneel next to a small crater in the street. "It is almost as if the attackers were confused."
"Over here, footprints," Jaina called out. The Jedi Ambassador was gesturing to several rather large indentations in the ground. "Whatever it is, it's at least walker sized."
"Those tracks aren't anything the Imperials use, unless they have some sort of secret weapon."

"So we now have a suspect capable of wiping out a Chiss colony, deploying walker-sized units, and still leaving no trace of their existence," Jaina surmised, shaking her head. "And the situation was bad enough with just the Ascendancy and the Imperials going at it. There didn't have to be a third party involved to make things complicated."
A Chiss scientist came up to the trio. "Assistant Syndic."
"Report."
"Analysis of the blast craters revealed an intriguing mix of gases. We believe the explosives used were methane base, though a couple of the craters were remnants of hydrogen blasts. The stab wounds on the deceased were inflicted by organic weaponry."
"The Yuuzhan Vong?" Jagged raised an eyebrow.
"No, well, not any Yuuzhan Vong weapon we are familiar with."
"Your best guess then."
"It would seem impossible, but I would have to say that this attack was a Killik attack, sir."
"Killik?" The disbelief and surprise clear on the faces of everyone within hearing range of the report.
"Yes, sir. It's the only possible explanation. If this were a Vagaari or Ssi-ruuvi attack, not only would it be far from their territory, but they would have at least taken some prisoners. All bodies are accounted for. Also, both the Vagaari and Ssi-ruuvi use energy weapons. There is no sign of blasters being discharged by anyone other than our own security forces. The tracks left in the ground match known footprints recorded when the Ruling Families employed the Killik for labor, and some of the residue left behind on this planet is positive for Killik DNA. Saliva recovered from some of the deceased is also confirmed to be Killik."
"But it doesn't make any sense," Irolia frowned. "The Killiks are a neutral race, never showing signs of aggression, or even the capacity for violence. All they care about is building up their nests and looking for food. After the affected Ruling Families were stripped of their status, the Killiks retreated to the Unknown Regions and haven't been heard from or seen since."
"I only know what the scans tell me, ma'am. And the scans point to the Killiks as being instigators."
"Can they even plan a war between two peoples?" Irolia said, looking lost.
"Is there any idea as to where the attackers went after this?" Jaina asked.

"Wild Space is our best guess," the scientist shrugged. "The hyperspace technique used by the attackers is not one our equipment has seen before."
Jaina heard her comlink chirp, and she answered it. "Go ahead Turi."
"*Just got permission from Imp Intel to share our findings. We have absolutely no idea what to make of it. The water supplies on Yaga Minor had an alcohol level three hundred times the stiffest stuff in the Moff's storerooms. It was contaminated with some black substance that our techs are still analyzing. On other planets, we found craters, bodies, and destruction, but no evidence of the attackers. The bodies bear no sign of blaster wounds, but look as if they had been stabbed and cut apart. As fond as these Imperials are of comparing the Chiss to animals, they have grudgingly admitted that the Chiss aren't responsible."*
"Similar story over here," Jaina said. "Our scientists think that the Killiks are responsible, however."
"*The Killiks? There has been no reference in recorded history to the Killiks ever being able to launch an attack such as this."*
"Yeah, I know. We'll look into it more."
"*One moment, General Dorja has something to say to me. Okay. Uh huh. Right. Jaina, provided that you keep us in the loop, and there are no further attacks on Imperial assets, the Imperials are going to pass this onto the Ascendancy. If it <u>is</u> the Killiks, then it's not a matter the Empire is interested in. A Killik problem is a Chiss one, and not an Imperial one."*
"Of course it is."
"*Sorry about that.*"
"Not your fault Turi, I'll let the Ascendancy know. Jaina, out." Jaina gestured with the comlink to the others. "You heard, right?"
"Yes," Jagged said. "If this is the Killiks, then they will be striking from the Unknown Regions."
"They'll also be poised to colonize nearby planets in order to sustain their population," the Chiss scientist spoke up. "*If* this is the Killiks."
"Just out of curiosity, if it is the Killiks, and we end up finding them, what then?" Jaina asked. "In this case, it's the exact opposite of what would happen if the Ascendancy went to war with the Empire. The Empire will no doubt be hoping that the Chiss will weaken themselves in a war with the Killiks and take advantage of that. Either way, a war weakens both and lets the third party fill in the power vacuum."
"This is why I am just a soldier," Jagged grumbled. "Why I liked being just a colonel. Far easier to be told to do something than to think of the repercussions your actions and orders will have."

"It's why I'm the Jedi Ambassador to the Ascendancy," Jaina replied drolly. "It's my job to think of those repercussions so you soldier people don't hurt your heads. The sacrifice is great, but we Jedi are good at being self-sacrificing."
"To answer your question," Irolia cleared her throat. "What happens will depend on the word of the Aristocra. It will be up to her to go to war, to devote the resources of House Nuruodo to a full scale conflict."
"No disrespect to her, but that isn't exactly reassuring."
"The Chiss are already trying to portray themselves as someone the galaxy can't push around," Irolia remarked, though she communicated her understanding with a nod. "It'd be a poor start to that new character if we let an attack on three of our Colony Stations go unanswered."
"One way or another, the Chiss will go to war," Jagged admitted reluctantly. He looked to Jaina solemnly. "The attack on our colonies voids our Non-Aggression Law. And if the Empire tries to take advantage of us in the process, we will have to respond with force as well. After the incident with the dissolving of Ruling Families, the Vagaari, and then Yuuzhan Vong War, the Ascendancy's greatest fear is insolvency, of being unable to protect the Chiss. This situation is a perfect storm that plays right into that fear. I will understand if you would leave to return to the Jedi, Ambassador Solo. This is not their fight. But as the Assistant Syndic of the CEDF, I have no choice but to follow my orders and defend the Ascendancy, by any means necessary."
Despite the situation, Jaina smiled wanly, stepped up to Jagged, and tugged on his collar. "You still have much to learn, Assistant Syndic. When was the last time you saw me run from a galaxy-destabilizing problem?"
"As the ranking officer of the Ascendancy, I was duty-bound to give you that option." Jagged shrugged, cupping Jaina's face in his hands. "I know better than to think you'd take it."
Irolia cleared her throat again. "Sir, ma'am. I know you two find galaxy-destabilizing problems a turn on, but now really isn't the best of times. Can the two of you do that *after* we come out of this crisis intact? Sir."
Jagged and Jaina glanced at each other, at Irolia, and then smirked coyly as they stepped apart.
"We can do that," Jaina said nonchalantly, as if she hadn't been a second away from kissing the ranking Ascendancy officer senseless in front of the science team.

"Have our people wrap up their studies here and begin research into Killik behavior," Jagged ordered professionally. "If we're going to war, I want our people prepared on what to expect."
"Sir," Irolia and the scientist with them saluted.
With the two gone, Jagged surveyed the devastation around them. A faint wind carried with it the scent of smoke and death. "Truthfully, Jaina. How do you see this ending?"
Jaina stood at his side, watching teams of Chiss pull the bodies together for a mass grave. "In a word, Jag? Terribly. I'm not sure why, but I have a *very* bad feeling about this."
{-[Chapter End]-}

Zekk
{-[I]-} {-[I]-}
Mid-day on Denon was about as busy as midnight on the new capital of the Galactic Alliance. The ecumenopolis was forever occupied, the air cluttered with rows upon rows of speeder, spaceships, and automated delivery freighters; and the ground constantly a bustle, full of people with things to do. It was every-bit the planet-wide city that Coruscant was, making the politicians, refugees, and visiting soldiers feel right at home.
The planet was also every bit the opposite of Mon Calamari, heavily populated with air full of oils and exhaust. It was an urbanized, mechanical-driven world, unlike the flowing oceans and abundance of wildlife that could be found on the previous capital planet.
Discordance, manufactured chaos, the planet had its appeal, but it lacked the calming affect provided by the sea breeze and symbiosis of an eco-system in balance.
Like Coruscant, there were the haves, have-nots, and never-will-haves, spread across the planet like geological strata. The never-will-haves were crammed in the lowest reaches of the planet, barely existing and hardly living. Above them, in the lower-level slums and in the darkened alleyways were the have-nots; refugees, the every-day war veteran, the poor, everyone the galaxy could easily forget about. And above them all, in the glittering skytowers, floating penthouses, and luxury suites were the haves. All those who managed to come out of the war ahead in one way or another. Politicians, businessmen, crime-lords, and many others who probably weren't the most deserving of what they had. It was unfair, but it was the way the galaxy worked.
And then there were the people who did their best to make sure that the galaxy gave everyone a fair chance.

Jedi Knight Zekk could only grin ruefully as he listened to both Taryn and Trista fill him in on the latest news from Hapes over their meal at a restaurant very popular with the military crowd. It was hard to imagine that it had been nine-years, almost to the day, since he had first met them. Much had changed since that time and their reunion two years ago.

A reunion that would not have occurred had Jacen not sent him a HoloNet message requesting his presence on Hapes.

After their adventure on Tatooine, he and the Zel twins had lost touch as the galactic events took precedent. Even after the war was over, Zekk had fully devoted himself to his Jedi duties, without even giving a second thought to the red-haired twins. There had just been so much wrong in the galaxy, so many people suffering, that he had been kept completely occupied by the needs of the others.

Added to the list of excuses was that, in that time, he had found a kindred soul in Mallie Marek; the daughter of Galen and Juno. He and Mallie had become an item shortly after the end of the war, and stayed together for several years, both dedicating themselves to pulling the galaxy back to its feet with their own brand of compassion and care. He and Mallie had been alike in many ways, capable of being that guardian protector and fierce warrior at the same time, but also showing a tenderness and empathy that most Jedi were known for. But in the end, the constant suffering they faced, as well as the distance put between them caused their duties as Jedi, eventually forced them to part ways. It had been an amicable split, with the two of them remaining close friends and pen-pals.

When Jacen's message had come in, originally, Zekk had intended to put it off. He had still been feeling slightly down after the breakup, and the last thing he wanted was to leave the numbing work he had buried himself in. But then, out of the blue, he received a HoloNet message from the High Council giving him mandatory leave time.

Strange that Jacen was also a member of the High Council.

And that the two messages had been suspiciously back-to-back.

But there was little Zekk could do against a direct order from the High Council.

Jacen's message had been specific. He was to wait for Jacen in the Queen Mother's quarters for a matter of serious importance, and he was to arrive in his Jedi robes with his hood over his head.

Of course, Jacen neglected to mention the invitation to the palace security. And naturally, any uninvited intruders in the Queen Mother's room were more than likely to be assassins.

Zekk had only been in the Queen Mother's room for all of a minute when the Force told him he was about to be attacked. He had reacted quickly, blocking the first attack only to receive a stun baton to his back, and a boot to his face.
Knocked to the ground, two vibroblades were promptly placed at either side of his neck, his arms held down by two identical sets of leather boots. It was then that his hood fell away.
"*Zekk?" A wide-eyed Taryn gasped.*
"*What are you doing here?" An equally startled Trista blurted, as the both of them quickly holstered their vibroblades.*
Zekk, for his part, was more than a little dazed. Apart from the whole getting-knocked-on-his-butt in the Queen Mother's chamber, he was having a hard time placing the voices of the Zel twins with the two very much grown women still standing on his arms. Their sharp, angular faces, matured from since when that had last met all those years ago, reminded him more of Tenel Ka's regal features than that of the pair of just-turned-twelve year old little girls from memory. But that wasn't what had given him the most pause. Given that they <u>were</u> standing on his arms, he couldn't help but notice their long, toned and slender legs, accented by form-fitting leather, black pants. His eyes wandered back upwards to their bared, flat midriffs, exposed by their green, Rancor-skin tank-tops.The black leather jackets they wore over their leather tops only enhanced the curves of their very feminine forms and gave them both a seductive air of confidence and danger. They definitely weren't anything like the feisty, red-headed little girls that he could recall.
"*Maybe you kicked him too hard," Trista said worriedly.*
"*I thought he was an assassin!" Taryn, quickly got off Zekk's arm and knelt by his side. "Zekk, are you okay? Just great, on top of everything else that's happened, I have to go and give a Jedi brain damage. I really do have the worst luck."*
"*I'm okay," Zekk finally managed to say, shaking himself from his thoughts.*
"*Oh," Taryn quickly blushed and pulled back. "Well...good."*
"*What are you two doing here?" Zekk said weakly.*
"*<u>We're</u> part of the Queen Mother's Royal Guard," Trista said with a raised eyebrow that proved just how closely related she was to Tenel Ka. Helping him to his feet, she cocked her head to the side. "What are <u>you</u> doing here?"*
"*Jacen invited me. Said to meet him here and that it was a matter of utmost importance."*

"The Jedi Solo? He's with the Queen Mother out in the gardens. She said that they were not to be disturbed for at least another three hours."
"Oh," Zekk said dimly.
As he regained his senses, he detected an unusual amount of anguish coming from the normally bubbly Taryn. Outwardly though, the teen had withdrawn almost completely and didn't seem to be her usual chatty self. He briefly glanced over at Trista and saw that the more solemn of the duo was also a lot more guarded than when he had last seen her. A small undercurrent of animosity and resentment mixed with confusion and regret, creating an almost invisible barrier between the two sisters. Despite the years that had passed, their non-verbal distress somehow still tugged at the same heartstrings that had existed all those years ago.
"Well, I'm sorry to intrude. I must of have gotten the dates wrong or something."
"That's okay, it happens," Trista shrugged. "You're lucky that the Queen Mother was the one who had us guarding her room. Anyone else might not have pulled back in time."
"Yeah," Zekk rubbed at his face. He was pretty sure that a boot impression was still highly visible. "Good kick."
"Thanks," Taryn's smile was so fleeting it might not have existed at all.
"You're kind of quiet, Taryn," he said softly.
Taryn just folded her arms in front of her chest and nodded. "Not much to say. It's nice to see you again though. Been a while."
"Well," Zekk's eyes darted back and forth to both twins. He wasn't sure what to say. They had been twelve when he had last seen them. Now they were seventeen, and clearly succeeding in their goal to be Tenel Ka's protectors. Yet neither of them seemed as happy or outgoing as he remembered them to be. In fact, if he was reading things right, he could tell that there was some amount of hostility between the two.
It was then that both Jacen and Tenel Ka's intentions finally clicked. He sent them a mental eye-roll, and received two cheerful 'good lucks' in response.
"If you'd like, we can escort you to your ship so you can verify the meeting time," Trista said professionally. Her expression was closed off, but her gray eyes seem to bore into him, as if she was trying to silently communicate her thoughts.
With his early epiphany, Zekk caught on to what Trista was trying to do."The both of you? Who's going to guard the Queen Mother's room?"

Trista blinked, as if she hadn't considered that issue. "You make a good point, Jedi Zekk. Taryn, can you take him to his ship? I'll stand guard over the room."
Taryn's jaw moved several times as she glared at her sister, her gray eyes looking almost fearful. She swallowed bravely though, nodding after a couple of seconds. "Sure. I've been meaning to get some exercise anyways. Come on, Jedi Zekk. The sooner you get off this planet, the better."
The trip back to his ship had been full of all sorts of awkward silence. Despite catching on to the broader plan at work, Zekk still wasn't sure what had caused such a drastic change. Fortunately, the High Council had given him four whole weeks of leave as thanks for his four years of anti-crime work. That had been more than enough time to learn about everything that had happened.
Since then, he and the twins had met up on occasion, just to chat and share their latest adventures with one and other. They'd also had more than their share of adventures together, which, strangely enough, tended to occur whenever they met up. He was not completely unaware of Tenel Ka and Jacen's behind-the-scenes machinations, but it wasn't like he was unappreciative of them either. Taryn and Trista kept things fun, lighthearted, a welcomed change of pace from all the traumatized refugees he was used to dealing with.
And the brightness also caused him to realize just why he and Mallie had parted. They had been *too* alike, both needing someone to lighten their day after working with all the suffering refugees and war-survivors. He silently hoped Mallie had found her 'Taryn and Trista,' someone to cheer her up after the burdens caused by the duty of a Jedi.
"So, what do you think, Zekk?" Taryn asked, bringing him out of his thoughts. "Do you think the Queen Mother will finally allow Trista and I to clean house if one of them tries to assassinate her daughter again?"
Zekk almost shuddered at the idea. "You two are bodyguards, not assassins. But, I would image a fair portion of Hapes' nobility will have a drastic change of heart if something like that happens."
"I don't even see why the Queen Mother keeps many of those nobles around," Trista said, pausing for a moment to give an icy glare to a waiter who had been leering at her. Both she and her sister were in formal wear per the restaurant's dress code; curve-hugging, skin-showing, black leather dresses that accented their beauty and lethal attractiveness. The waiter promptly paled and hastily retreated into the kitchen.

"Did you know that within the past week alone, five of them have tried to kill her, ten of them have tried to bribe her or her friends to get their own agendas advanced, and three of them were seen consorting with Hapes' enemies?" Taryn said with a disgusted shake of her head.
"Unfortunately, no matter how powerful they are, a government can't be run by one person," Zekk shrugged. "If Tenel Ka got rid of all of the nobles that annoyed her, it would increase the workloads of the nobles that support her, and things wouldn't be as efficient."
"You would be right, of course," Trista sighed, looking out a bay window. The restaurant was on the top level of one of Denon skyscrapers, with a three-hundred and sixty degree view of the cityscape around them; as well as the traffic below. "Neither Taryn nor I like the political aspect of our job. Though it is necessary, it is a bit too tedious for our tastes."
"I know what you mean," Zekk nodded. "I've lost track of the number of times my taskforce captured a criminal only to have politicians from different planets argue about who had jurisdiction over said criminal. Especially if it's an election year and they want to portray themselves as 'tough on crime' and 'upholders of the peace.' Not like I can give one politician the criminal's arm, another his leg, and another his toe or something."
"It all depends on the type of 'piece' the politicians want to uphold," Taryn said with a mischievous smirk, impishly biting into a bread roll from the center basket.
"That was horrible, Taryn," Trista sighed, shaking her head. "I need to tell the Queen Mother to stop assigning you as guard whenever Jacen Solo visits."
As the first course of their meal was brought over, Zekk felt a great disturbance in the Force. Those were never good. He glanced briefly at the course that the waiter had brought to the table—soup. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with it apart from not having any crackers. But he doubted the Force would care about that. Frowning, he immediately began to scan the restaurant, not exactly sure what he was feeling.
Taryn and Trista, trained warriors that they were, saw the tightening of his face and likewise fell silent; scrutinizing their surroundings with feigned casualness.
One table over, former Supreme Commander Sien Sovv was eating a meal with several other high-ranking officers. A group of social-elites had a larger table on the opposite side of the room, the boisterous sounds of their conversation audible from every corner of the room. A few senators were mingling with several of their constituents at

another table, and other tables still were full of soldiers enjoying their leave. There were several hundred people in the room, but nothing appeared to be amiss. Laughter, light-hearted talk, and people going about their noon-time meal were all that the trio could see.
Then Zekk spotted what he was looking for through the paneled windows that surrounded the dining hall. Two sky-cars, followed by a larger transport, were barreling towards the skyscraper at high speeds.
"Get down!" Zekk bellowed, using the Force to command everyone who heard him. He quickly tackled a nearby Taryn to the ground, pulling Trista with them as sky-cars continued their ballistic course.
A deafening crash followed only seconds later, with glass and metal shards flying every which way as the two sky-cars rammed their way through the windows. Tables and people were flung about as the heavy vehicles continued to slide forwards, taking out supporting columns and tearing up the floor beneath them. They finally came to a smoking stop after traversing the entirety of the room, leaving a trail of blood, bodies, and debris in their wake. Most of those who had been at Sien Sovv's table, the former Supreme Commander and veteran of the Yuuzhan Vong War included, had been killed instantly.
As shell-shocked diners weakly pulled themselves off the ground, the transport that had been following the sky-cars pulled up alongside the gaping hole made by the speeders. A hatch opened, and an assortment of armed individuals began pouring into the room. The nearest diners were immediately cut down by blasterfire, while several more were blown apart as the assailants lobbed thermal detonators across the room. Dazed soldiers and senators were slain as they just gaped at the improbability of the attack being launched.
"Taryn, Trista, you two okay?" Zekk shouted over the sound of blaster fire. He had used the Force to shield the three of them from debris, but had to ask to be sure.
"We're fine," Trista nodded. She had overturned their table to use as a shield and was crouching behind it with her blaster drawn. "Though you can get off my sister now. Force knows she won't ask you to."
Zekk blinked again, realizing that Taryn was still pinned beneath him. Flushing crimson, he quickly rolled off of her. "Sorry."
"I'm not," Taryn grinned, drawing her own blaster from a thigh-holster. "It's been a while since we fought together. This should be fun."
Zekk couldn't help but smile as he loosened his lightsaber from his utility belt. "It's only been a few months since the last time we got into a firefight, Taryn."
"A few months too long. I'm a girl of action, you know."

Zekk chuckled ruefully. "Believe me, I know. You two shoot, I'll block, like usual."
"Everyone should have their own personal Jedi shield," Taryn quipped, before her serious 'warrior-girl' face fell into place. She and her sister exchanged nods and rose as one. Immediately, several of the attackers turned towards them. They didn't turn quick enough. A hail of rapid-fire shots stitched every single attacker with pin-point precision, not a single shot wasted.
Return fire flew towards the red-headed warriors, but Zekk's lightsaber snapped to life and began deflecting every bolt that came their way. In the meantime, the Zel twins continued their relentless barrage of accurate laser shots. As the return fire lessened, they advanced out from behind the table with Zekk still covering them.
The transport docked in front of the window began to pull away. Seeing this, Taryn abandoned all caution and launched herself into an all-out sprint towards the window. Several blaster bolts whizzed by her, but she was undeterred as she kicked off the shattered edge of the building and hurled herself through the air. Just before the transport could get too far away, her hands gripped the edge of the still open door, and she pulled herself into the vehicle and closed the door behind her. Seconds later—as if something heavy was being tossed about within—the transport began rocking back and forth, struggling to stay afloat.
"Taryn," Zekk whispered in shock when the transport dipped out of sight.
"Don't worry," Trista said, her back to Zekk as they covered each other. "She does that all the time."
"Oh," Zekk said dumbly, reflecting a bolt back at its attacker. "I'm clear on my side, you?"
Trista waited for the final thug to peek out over a table, and promptly dispatched him with another headshot. "Done on my side as well."
Zekk slowly lowered his lightsaber. It was then that he realized that every single person Trista or Taryn had shot had merely been stunned. He raised a questioning eyebrow in Trista's direction.
"What? Just because we don't appreciate politics and schemes doesn't mean we aren't good at it. How else are we to find out who is behind the attack if we killed them all?" Trista said, kneeling by one of the people she had dispatched. She noticed Zekk's expression had yet to change. "Besides, it's more of a challenge, and effective, to get a head-shot with a stun bolt."
"Ah," Zekk nodded, accepting the more Hapan of responses.

The transport that Taryn had leaped into veered its way back towards the restaurant, and then idled as it once again docked itself alongside the hole. The door opened, and eight very bruised and battered looking thugs all emerged with their hands over their heads and a defeated expression on their faces. Following them out with her blaster at the ready was a smiling Taryn. "Hey guys. Eight more to add to our collection."

Zekk let out a very long breath. Despite the deaths and chaos, he had to just shake his head. It was definitely just like old times.

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Even though the fighting was over, the drama wasn't. Denon security authorities had been on scene for all of ten minutes when a second group of individuals arrived, flashed a badge, and shooed the local officials away.

"Interesting," Trista noted, sitting with Zekk and Taryn in front of one of the dining tables.

Though they had decided to stick around as witnesses, they were quite the sight themselves. With the way they were positioned, it was almost as if they were part of a fashion shoot for some holomagazine.

Seated at the table, Zekk was covered from head to toe in dust and debris, his dark hair a mess. He was shirtless, having used his Jedi robes as makeshift bandages for several of the injured victims of the attack, so the dust only seemed to emphasis every muscle of his lean torso.

He was flanked by the lethally toned and beautiful Zel twins, standing on either side of him like bodyguards; their form-emphasizing leather dresses and black, knee-high krayt dragon leather boots, equally debris-covered.

None of the three had a scratch on them, however, which couldn't be said for their charges kneeling before them.

"Galactic Alliance Intelligence?" Taryn guessed, eyeing the newcomers in the same analytical way her sister was doing.

"They got here rather quick," Zekk commented, absently accepting a new shirt handed to him by one of the relief workers with a nod of thanks.

"Aaaand they're heading straight for us," Taryn murmured.

A dark-skinned woman, her hair tied back in a professional bun, approached with a small entourage of formal-wear wearing individuals behind her. "Jedi Knight Zekk, Ladies Taryn and Trista Zel, I am Director Belindi Kalenda, head of Galactic Alliance Intelligence."

"What can we do for you, Director?" Zekk asked, standing.

"I merely wish to ensure your cooperation in investigating this tragic speeder accident that touched off a gas explosion," Belindi said directly, as if she herself was a Jedi impressing upon them the version of events.
"Speeder accident," Taryn repeated slowly.
"Yes," Belindi raised an eyebrow.
"Politics," Zekk said softly. "Cal Omas' cabinet is already in hot water for the Tion Hegemony and all the other problems. The capital can't be made to look vulnerable to those problems or he'd lose all credibility."
"Correct, Jedi Zekk," Belindi replied. "So does that mean I have your support in this matter?"
"Our new friends?" Zekk gestured to the apprehended thugs.
"We'll take care of them."
"Do you know who hired them?"
"We'll take care of it."
"That's a no," Taryn said, rising from her chair, her entire body seemingly coiling for a proverbial strike. Growing up in a society where lies and deceit were the norm, she despised cover-ups and purposeful misleading of the public. "What's to stop more of these 'speeder accidents' from happening, Director?"
"She does have a point," Zekk said mildly.
"Jedi involve themselves in investigations of local speeder crashes now?" Belindi challenged. "I would imagine your order is in just as much trouble as Cal Omas is. I don't tell you and your order how to become galactic pariahs and you don't tell me how to do my job."
"Then we're free to go?" Trista said, placing a restraining hand on her more excitable twin.
"So long as you know that if you say that this was anything other than a speeder accident you'll be arrested for treason, yes."
"We'll leave you to it, then," Zekk said. "You know our comm-frequency if you need to get in touch."
The trio turned around and calmly walked to the turbolift of the now ruined restaurant. Once the doors had closed, Taryn glowered at the plastisteel wall, seething. "A speeder crash? A speeder crash! Zekk, don't tell me that the Jedi Order's picked up a habit of lying to the general public now? I get enough lies on Hapes. If we don't tell someone and another attack happens…"
"Taryn," Trista said with patient amusement.
"What!" The red-head rounded on her sister.
"Has it crossed your mind that Zekk is a Jedi."
"I know he's one. What of it?"

"And Jedi can take information from people's heads if the safety of the general public relies on it?"
Taryn blinked. "Oh."
"Surely you wouldn't have let that pathetic excuse for a woman bully you, right?" Trista arched an eyebrow at their male companion; her words were every much a warning as they were a threat.
"You two have been a bad influence on me," Zekk sighed, nodding wearily.
"So," Taryn perked up. "Where are we heading to next?"
"Don't the two of you have a Queen Mother to protect?" Zekk reminded.
Taryn and Trista looked at each other, and then Trista pulled out a comlink. "Your Majesty, this is Trista."
"Go ahead. Is something wrong?"
"Jedi Knight Zekk has conscripted myself and Taryn on a mission of great importance. The safety and wellbeing of the people of Denon rely on it. Requesting permission to temporarily work in concert with the Jedi Order on such a matter."
"You have my permission to assist Jedi Knight Zekk on such a mission. I will be at the Jedi Temple after the Senate meeting, so you can find me there when it is time for us to depart."
"Understood," Trista said professionally.
Zekk simply hung his head, unable to keep himself from smiling in amusement. "Thanks Tenel Ka, I could use the backup."
"Will you be needing further assistance? Trista is not one to exaggerate the importance of a mission."
"Like I am?" Taryn mouthed.
"Possibly, we're heading to the Old City," Zekk said into Trista's comlink. "Think the Jedi Order can spare a guide or two?"
"One moment…Jedi Master Klin-Fa Gi informs me that Jedi Padawan Rali Xici and Siare Amah are experts in the area. Where would you like to meet them?"
"Warehouse district, third ward," Zekk answered. "Thanks again."
"It is no trouble. Taryn, Trista, please see to it that Zekk survives this mission more or less the way you found him. He is a dear friend of mine and I would hate to have anything happen to him."
"You can count on us, Your Majesty," Trista said. "We'll contact you with the results when we're finished. Trista Zel out."
"You were saying?" Taryn said with a mischievous grin.
"Let's just find out where those attackers came from," Zekk replied drolly, the turbolift doors opening once more. He knew he should have known better than to try to win an argument with both of them. "We're

fortunate that the Jedi Order doesn't have to take orders from GA Intelligence."
"We're not *that* fortunate," Taryn said, glaring back at the upper floors of the building. "If GA Intelligence was any good, we wouldn't have to be doing this."
"So you would rather our meeting for the first time in several months end at lunch?" Zekk said innocently, somewhat aware of Taryn's feelings for him. It was something that had developed during his stay on Hapes those two years ago, and it surprised and flattered him to say the least.
But it hadn't always started out like that.
The trip back to his ship was made in complete silence, the floor-to-ceiling windows offering him faint glimpses of the planet outside as a small reprieve. If Zekk didn't know any better, he could swear that he was feeling both shame and anger irradiate out from his guide, both aimed towards different targets. He didn't say anything though, and neither did she. In fact, it appeared as if the last thing she wanted to do was be anywhere near him.
"Five years. In that time, you could have at least left a holo-message, you know," Taryn said unexpectedly.
"Huh?"
"After we parted ways on Tatooine. I checked my message box almost daily hoping to hear from you. At first I blamed the downed HoloNet for the reason why I didn't even get a 'hey, how are you doing after getting your head kicked in' message. But when the HoloNet was restored, and still nothing?" There was a biting accusation in her voice, but her gaze remained locked firmly on some point ahead of them. "I eventually understood. I was being a foolish little girl. I was just a little girl to your eyes, a bother. One of the many forgettable faces you met as you zipped around the stars doing your Jedi business. Not like you had the time to let me know how you were doing. That you had survived the final battle when nearly three-quarters of your Order was killed."
"Taryn, it wasn't like that..."
"Did you know, I had to hear it from the media channels that you had survived the war? I needed to eavesdrop on an intel brief to the Queen Mother to learn that you were dating a fellow Jedi? I don't know what Trista or the Queen Mother are thinking, but don't expect me to just spill my heart out to you because we've finally met again. We're not friends, probably never were."
The surge of bitterness and self-loathing took Zekk completely off-guard, almost as much as her words. As Taryn's rant echoed off the

walls of the empty hallway, he could almost see the ball of hurt and anguish at the core of her being.
"Taryn," he tried.
"We're almost to your ship, Jedi Knight Zekk. You should be able to find your way back from here."
Before Zekk could take another step, things went from hostilely awkward to worse. A young Hapan nobleman appeared at the other end of the hallway and made his way towards them, his very aura projecting confidence and strength.
"Taryn," he smiled, blue eyes glittering charmingly.
"Zee," Taryn stammered. She seemed to freeze in her spot, her eyes darting back and forth between Zekk and the new arrival.
"I thought I heard your voice," 'Zee's' smile was every bit as attractive as the rest of him. Dark hair, sparkling eyes, he was physically fit and looked dashing in the deep blue clothing of a Hapan noble. Zekk didn't know much about this man, but ' Zee' already seemed to stand out from the usual Hapans he had met. "The Queen Mother told me I'd find you here. Are you having any trouble?"
"No, no trouble at all," Taryn said quickly, taking a step away from Zekk.
"Okay. It's been three months, have you made up your mind yet? I know your sister doesn't approve, but..."
"I still need more time," Taryn blurted out. "Sorry. Now if you could leave..."
"Taryn?" Zekk blinked.
"Where are my manners?" the Hapan noble held out a hand towards Zekk. "Greetings. The name's Zedal AlGray, fourth in line to the Noble House of AlGray."
"Zekk, Jedi Knight," Zekk said, automatically shaking the outstretched hand.
"Pleasure, you know Lady Taryn Zel?"
"We've...met. You know her?"
"I should hope so, we're betrothed," Zedal said with a laugh. "Isn't that right, Taryn?"
"Of course not," Taryn laughed at Zekk, wrapping her arms around one of his in a playful manner. "We barely get to spend enough time with you as it is."
"We have our duties, Taryn," Trista said dryly.
"Don't give me that, sister," Taryn shot back. "You're just as eager to spend time on a dangerous mission with Zekk as I am."
"Maybe not as eager as you," Trista muttered under her breath. "Some people shouldn't be mixing business and pleasure after all."

"You are such a Dug, Trista," Taryn rolled her eyes with a laugh. Zekk just smiled. He offered his other arm to Trista, who raised an eyebrow but accepted it nonetheless."Come on, we have a planetary disaster in the making to stop."
"Just one of your usual Jedi missions, nothing special," Trista said glibly, the trio walking to a black, sleek Hapan speeder; with Zekk receiving many envious looks in the process.
"You know, Jedi and 'disaster' aren't supposed to go together so easily," Zekk replied. "We're keepers of the peace, not the galaxy's saviors."
"Tell that to all the idiots who think launching a galaxy-destabilizing plan in the presence of the Jedi is a good thing," Taryn remarked brightly, inclining her head in acknowledgment as Zekk opened the speeder door for her, and then did the same for Trista. "Then again, you do manage to keep our lives interesting."
"I'll hold you to those remarks once we face whoever it is we're supposed to be facing," Zekk said.
"It can't be *that* bad," Taryn shrugged. "Don't worry, Zekk. You have me and Trista watching your back. Queen Mother's orders."
"Thanks," Zekk exhaled, settling into the driver's seat. "Well, let's see what the Force has in store for us this time."
{-[III]-} {-[III]-}
"There," Taryn said, her sharp eyes spying their guides up ahead. During the trip over, both she and her sister had changed out of the formal wear and back into their green leather shirts, and black jackets and pants; once again looking like the deadly warriors they were. They were coasting through a lesser-used part of the Denon capital that sat just a half-hour speeder ride away from the main streets. It was almost scary how quickly things changed from the haves to the have-nots, like an invisible forcefield set up to prevent people from crossing in either direction. All around them were dilapidated warehouses, boarded up homes and apartment units, and an overall sense of gloom and despair. Street gangs roamed freely, as did the poor and downtrodden. It was a sad testament to the state of the galaxy when places like this still existed, even when there was a Jedi temple on the planet full of Jedi jetting off to help the far corners of the galaxy.
Zekk couldn't help but find it ironic. The people he was seeing now were the very types of people he and Mallie had tried to help during their stint working with the refugees of different planets. Even on the capital of the Galactic Alliance, the same problems he saw in the Outer Rim and elsewhere were just as prevalent.

"I see them," Zekk nodded, angling their speeder towards their destination.
A good-sized crowd was gathered around a small group of people, who looked to be handing out food-goods and blankets.
"That's it, one at a time, please," a teenage Zeltron called out with a winning smile. "There's plenty for everyone, so no rush."
"Hey, I'm blind, not stupid," a sandy-haired teen with a white and gold bandana wrapped over his eyes chided. "If you want seconds you're going to have to wait until everyone else has one."
And then Zekk realized why his musing had taken him back to Mallie. In the center of the crowd, coaching several others, was the daughter of Juno Eclipse and Galen Marek. She was still as beautiful as he remembered, her white-blond hair tied back in a bun atop her head. She seemed to sense him too, because she glanced in their direction and gave him a small wink before returning to her task.
Zekk stopped the speeder, unable to keep a silly smile from appearing. What were the odds of him running into her when they had the entire galaxy to help heal?
"Hey guys, welcome! Master Klin-Fa sent word that you were coming," the Zeltron called out, waving cheerfully. She handed off the next few bundles of supplies to another person, and waded her way through the crowd.
"She tell you why?" Zekk asked.
"Said it was important Jedi business," the Zeltron shrugged. "Oh, and you can call me Raxi. Jedi Apprentice Raxi if you just have to be formal. Anything but my official name."
"Don't worry, Zekk isn't one of those stuffy Jedi," Mallie laughed, joining Raxi. She quickly pulled Zekk into a hug. "Force, it's so good to see you again, Zekk. Have you been well?"
"As well as one can be," Zekk chuckled, patting her back. "You know us Jedi, an adventure around every corner."
"So, what brings you to our little neck of the woods?" Mallie let her hand brush his check affectionately before stepping back, her blue eyes glimmering brightly. "Has to be something big if you want to go to the Old City."
"Former Supreme Commander Sien Sovv was just killed a half hour ago by a seemingly random speeder crash," Zekk said dryly.
"Some speeder crash," Mallie's expression darkened. Her bond with Zekk allowed her to pick up what he wasn't saying aloud. "And I think I know where you guys can begin your search."
"You're not coming with?"

Mallie sighed and gestured helplessly to the crowd behind her. "As fun as it would be to kick arse and wreak havoc in the Old City, I just can't. I'm delivering relief supplies from Corulag to this lot out here, and then I have one of those fun soirees with a bunch of politicians later today. With Rahm and father helping out the Remnant, I'm left trying to make Corulag relevant in this day and age. You know how hard that can be. Don't worry though, Zekk. Both Jedi Apprentice Raxi and Amah know the Old City like the back of their hands."
"We practically grew up down there," Siare Amah, the sandy-haired teen with the blindfold, said, joining the group. "Hi, I'm Siare Amah."
"A pleasure," Trista said, speaking for the first time since she had left the speeder. "Trista, Trista Zel of the Royal House of Hapes."
"Taryn," Taryn added on cue. When Mallie stepped back into the crowd, Zekk was puzzled by the small amount of relief that rolled off of Taryn. As he filed it away for later, out of the corner of his eyes he saw Mallie just shake her head and give him a sympathetic Force-poke in his shoulder.
Zekk's attentions were drawn back to the newest arrival when Siare made a small clicking noise with his tongue, and then tilted his head at the Zels. "Twins?"
"Yes," Taryn blinked. "But how…?"
"Oh, the blindness thing, yeah," Siare said, waving a hand in front of his face. "Sometimes I forget about that. I see through Force-enhanced echolocation so I don't care much about sight. Pretty nifty."
"You aren't a Miraluka?" Trista said.
"Half," Siare nodded. "And half human. Makes me almost completely blind and out of touch with the Force. How could you tell I had seer's blood?"
"Your bandanna, it has a Miralukan clan crest on it," Trista gestured futilely.
"Oh, it does?" Siare involuntarily reached up to feel the golden embroidery of his blindfold. "Seha just said I'd look good with it on, gave it to me for my birthday; nice of her."
"We should get going," Raxi said. "If you're looking for the legally-challenged of Denon, the Old City is the best place to go. Siare and I know a few places that have been more active than usual."
"Any big shots who have the ability to send thirty heavily armed thugs on a suicide attack?" Zekk asked.
Raxi's eyebrows rose. "Thirty? And heavily armed? Only one person in the Old City has the resources to do something like that. His organization is called the 'Colony.' A criminal syndicate with

connections that rival the Black Suns, but with empathy and social work that rival the Jedi Order. The Force guide you here?"
"More or less," Zekk nodded. "And I've had to deal with Colony pirates before on several Outer Rim worlds. As far as pirates go though, they're pretty tame. Didn't think they'd have a base on Denon of all places."
"More than a base. The entrance to the nearest Colony enclave is really close by. Mallie set up this aid-camp to counter its influence in the region."
"Has the government tried to do anything about him?"
Raxi placed her hands on her hips as she shook her head. "Compared to all the galactic problems, this guy's just a small fry. But he's a small fry with a nasty bite. Siare and I have tangled with his people before. No matter how many times we ransack his store-houses and get his people arrested though, he always seems to recover in a month or two. It's like he has some backdoor to a military surplus store or something. He has enough firepower and knows the terrain well enough to make the local authorities scared of him."
"We've seen everything from Merr-Sonn E-Webs and rocket launchers, to military grade plasma canons and sniper rifles. Well, Raxi's seen anyways. I've just felt the pressure waves every time they've hurled thermal detonators in our direction."
"And do you know who this boss is?" Trista asked. They began to walk towards one of the warehouses.
"Only his alias. His men have called him the Joiner King," Raxi answered. "His people are die-hard fanatics who've been able to resist Force techniques. Granted, neither Siare nor myself are strong in the Force, but still…"
"He's stayed quiet for the most part, though. And as long as he leaves the refugees alone and doesn't expand his operations to the surface, we leave him alone," Siare said, kicking aside a small pile of debris to reveal a trapdoor just off to the side of the warehouse. "No sense stirring up a gundark's nest if we don't have to. But if he's responsible for the event that needed thirty heavily-armed thugs, then that changes things."
"Have you ever spoken to him?" Zekk questioned.
"By holo only," Siare said. "The last time was to arrange a ceasefire between his people and our aid crews. He had developed a bad habit of shooting at them so Raxi and I had to take down one of his lieutenants…again. He's kind of crazy so he often does things that go against his stated purposes and goals. Unfortunately, his people are just as crazy and are all for others joining their group."

"The more I hear about this, the more I'm looking forward to this trip underground," Taryn said sarcastically. "Scrupulous criminals with stockpiles of military-grade weapons, fanatical thugs, and old buildings."
"Just think of it as Hapes on a bad day," Zekk commented glibly as they began their descent down a rickety metal ladder. "Besides, all we're doing is investigating a speeder crash. Like Siare said, no sense stirring up a gundark's nest."
{-[IV]-} {-[IV]-}
"Betrothed?" Zekk raised a surprised eyebrow at Taryn.
For her part, Taryn just nodded mutely, not meeting his eyes. She looked back to Zedal. "Please, Zee. Can you leave me alone with this Jedi for a bit?"
"Of course," Zedal bowed formally. "I still haven't given up on you, Lady Zel. I'd be stupid to walk away from someone as amazing as you are."
"Thank you," Taryn barely whispered, tilting her head in acknowledgment.
"See you around, Jedi Zekk," Zedal bowed low again. "And since I don't know if I'll get a chance in the future, I'd like to thank you and the Jedi Order for what they have done to Hapes. It certainly is a much better place than it could have been had the Jedi not stepped in."
"You're welcome."
"Lady Zel," Zedal gave Taryn one last bow before continuing his trip down the hallway.
When he was gone, the awkward silence once again grew between Taryn and Zekk.
"A lot has changed, I see," Zekk finally said, his tone soft.
"Maybe, maybe not," Taryn shrugged, a defeated expression flashing across her face as she shrugged. She hugged herself with one arm and turned to look out a nearby window. "Trista despises him."
"She does?"
"Don't you have a ship to be on?" Taryn asked. Unlike before, though, there was no venom in her words. She continued to focus on a flock of birds outside the window, her body language saying what she wasn't.
"It'll still be there in a little bit."
Taryn turned to face him, looking to Zekk like a little girl lost in the vast halls of the Hapan Palace. "I don't need saving, Zekk."
"You're a Hapan warrior, of course not. If you need a friend though…."
"A friend?" Taryn raised a fine eyebrow.

"Yes. Look, I'm sorry for not keeping in touch. I have no excuses that'd matter. But if you're willing to give me a second chance, I promise to be a better friend than before."
"Friends…Hard to have any of those on Hapes," Taryn murmured, looking away again. "Everyone wants something here. Always out for themselves."
"What about Zedal?"
Taryn exhaled, shaking her head. "Not here."
Zekk followed her through the palace and out into a small, secluded garden in the back. Flowers of all sorts were in full bloom, with brightly winged insects and birds fluttering about. "Nice place."
"The Queen Mother gave it to me and Trista if we needed a place to get away from it all. We're the only ones allowed here, trespassers risk up to three years in prison." Taryn sat on a stone bench and momentarily closed her eyes to soak in the sunlight. "And…I'm sorry too, Zekk. I didn't mean what I said earlier…I'm just…I've had a run of bad luck recently and, well…"
"You had to vent somehow," Zekk supplied. He sat down in front of the bench and rested his back against the seat.
"Yeah," Taryn smiled faintly, bringing her legs up to her chest. "Growing up sucks, you know that? Sure you get to do a bunch more stuff, but you also have a bunch of pressure and responsibilities that society expects you to take up. Why can't growing up ever be fun?"
"Good question. I think my friends and I had to grow up a bit too fast. Galaxy-ending threats and all that."
"Believe me, a galaxy-ending threat would be welcomed compared to the problem's I've had these past few months," Taryn groaned, resting her head on her knees. "At least those have a clear solution: kill the bad guy and destroy the doomsday weapon or everyone you know kicks the bucket."
Zekk remained quiet, letting the rays of the sun beat down on him as Taryn continued to talk.
"You wanted to know about Zedal, right? How I'm to be wed to him?"
"You're definitely not the Taryn Zel I remember."
"Yeah, that little girl grew up much too fast too," Taryn whispered softly. "I met Zedal shortly after I got back to Hapes. He had been injured during Alyssia's coup attempt and was in the same med-ward as me. We talked a bit, became friends, talked some more. He's a couple years older than me, but you know how I was back then. I wasn't about to let that stop me."

Taryn trailed off, and Zekk felt her anxiety rise. He silently reached a hand back up towards her, and after a few seconds, she took it, squeezing it thankfully.
"We got older, became girlfriend-boyfriend in that convoluted Hapan sense of things. We were from rival Houses, often on opposite ends of the political spectrum, so a whole host of people began to see us as a unification of separate branches of the nobility. We went out, had lots of fun together. He's smart, and funny, and skilled in combat. Last year we became…became lovers." Her voice hitched at that, her grip on Zekk's hand becoming almost painful. She continued on, however, guilt and sorrow pouring off of her in waves. "Trista never approved of him, though. One time, I got so fed up with her attitude that I accused her of being jealous, of being no better than all the other Hapan nobles."
Zekk grimaced. He knew how close the two had been when they had been with him all those years ago. From what he had sensed, the wound between the two was deep, but not so deep that it couldn't be healed. Trista's non-verbal plea earlier had confirmed that Taryn's sister still wanted her twin back.
"She's kept her distance from me since then. And then when Zedal proposed to me…well in the three months since, today was probably the most she's ever said to me. Our teamwork has suffered to the point where the Queen Mother was forced to suspend us from active duty and place official reprimands in our files. Trista was even demoted from her officer's position. And the worst part is, I don't have a single clue how to fix this," Taryn whimpered, her gray eyes wet as she squeezed Zekk's hand again. "It's all become so complicated. I care a lot for Zedal, love him even, but I don't want to lose my sister either."
"What about your dad? What does he think?"
Taryn bowed her head, squeezing his hand just a bit tighter. "I wouldn't know. Father was killed in an assassination attempt on the Queen Mother almost two years ago. Trista and I only have each other…had each other. Stars, I hate this!"
"I'm sorry."
"*No…no it's…it's okay? This is normal for a Hapan noble family I guess. So it has to be okay. The lies, the manipulation, all normal." Taryn's voice wavered as she shook her head in disbelief.*
"*What happened between you and your sister? Why doesn't she like him?" Zekk asked gently, trying to change the subject.*
"She thinks he's just using me to get to the Queen Mother. House AlGray has always been on the periphery of things, and since Zedal and I have gotten closer, his family has seen an upswing in popularity and influence. But what he feels for me…what I feel for him…is real, I

know it. I just…I don't know. I feel like my entire world is crumbling as I'm trying to hold up this one little section of it."
"If you want, I can help you hold up that little section," Zekk offered softly. "You know, so you can concentrate on picking up all those little pieces? My offer to be your friend still stands. I'll try to do better this time around, promise."
"Not like I'll be any worse off," Taryn shrugged, yet he could feel some hope return to her.
Zekk tilted his head back to look up at the red-haired teen. "Thank you for telling me all of this, Taryn. I know it couldn't have been easy."
Taryn wiped at her eyes and emitted a shaky laugh as she swung their joint hands back and forth. "Thanks for listening. It felt good to finally get all that off my chest."
"Bottled up for a long time?"
"You know how Hapes is, you show just a tiny modicum of weakness and everyone jumps on you like a pack of starving wolves," Taryn muttered, sliding off the bench to sit next to Zekk and resting her head on his shoulder. "Can't trust anyone, not even family. Always have to watch my back."
Zekk could feel lethargy sink in as the pressure on her heart was temporarily relieved. "And me?"
Taryn unconsciously gripped his arm."If you were Hapan, I would never have brought you here."
"Good thing I'm not Hapan, then."
"Yeah," Taryn murmured, drifting off. "A very good thing."
Zekk glanced fondly at the more outgoing of the two Zel twins as the memories of their meeting on Hapes continued to play on. That unsteady truce he had built with her would soon be tested in a variety of ways, but those challenges had only brought them closer together.
"Up ahead, right there," Raxi gestured to a decrepit looking building several blocks away that had once been a towering highrise. The upper half appeared to have been blown off, and the rest charred by some type of fire. "That's the headquarters for the Joiner King's lieutenant. Whenever Siare or I have a bone to pick with his men, we go to him."
"He helps you?"
"We helped him get his position by deposing his predecessors," Siare said blandly. "He better."
They approached the building, a wide variety of thuggish looking characters gathered around roaring trashcan campfires all around. Both Taryn and Trista automatically let their hands drift to their weapons, quickly assessing and dismissing possible threats in the way they had been trained to do.

"Don't worry," Raxi said, without looking back. "These guys know us."
"We have a working relationship," Siare added cheerfully. "They stay out of the way, and everything works just fine."
"I see insanity is still a Jedi thing," Trista murmured to Zekk in a low voice.
"What do you expect? They had my generation for teachers."
Raxi brought them to a halt in front of a giant Besalisk. Despite Raxi's nearly two meter height, the mountain of a Besalisk towered over her, giant cleavers held in each of his four hands. The Zeltron, however, wasn't fazed in the slightest.
"Jaggoth! We're here to see your boss."
The Besalisk crossed his arms in front of himself and answered in a deep baritone. "Boss ain't seeing anyone, Raxi. Beat it."
"Do I really have to use a mind trick on you?" Raxi said with a flirtatious wink "We already know that mine work on you."
The Besalisk's heavy eyebrows twitched. "I have orders to chop ya to pieces if you try."
"How will that attempt be any better than the last three times you were ordered to do it?" Raxi asked.
The Besalisk unfolded his arms and gestured to the gathered crowd of thuggery. "Dey have da same orders. We've been recruiting, Raxi. You try anything, you're da one getting pounded dis time. Even if ya have new friends."
Raxi opened her mouth to reply, then closed it, tilting her head with a small frown. "Jaggoth, are you okay?"
"I'm just fine," the Besalisk grunted.
"Your eyes," Raxi said, taking a step back cautiously. "They were never completely black before."
"Like I said, I'm fine. Get lost if ya know what's good for you."
"Raxi, Siare, step back," Zekk said aloud. "Something's not right here. It's not just your Besalisk buddy whose eyes are black."
Raxi spun around to glance at the small army of armed thugs around them. Regardless of the species, all of their eyes appeared to be covered with some sort of black film. They also appeared to be moving in eerie synchronicity, slowly forming a circle without actually seeming to form a circle. "Okay guys, what new drugs have you been hitting this time? Dust? Ketracel? Glitterstim?"
"I think we should probably listen to Jaggoth and get going now," Siare said. "The Force echoes just got all weird. I'm not seeing a thing."
"You're blind, Siare."
"Gee, thanks for noticing, Raxi. But no, I meant my echolocation. Something's jamming it. Never happened before."

Zekk spun around as more thugs emerged from the shadows. Like the others, their eyes were completely glazed with black film. "What do you say we leave any further investigation to Galactic Alliance Intel?"
"Seconded," Taryn voiced tersely, holding blaster pistols in each of her hands. Her sister had pulled out a collapsible vibropike and was guarding Zekk's opposite side.
"Raxi?"
"Agreed," the Zeltron allowed the now truly blind Siare to climb onto her back.
"One moment," Jaggoth grunted out. The young Jedi and their friends froze almost instinctively. "Boss sent new orders. We're to capture you Jedi and have you join with us."
Before any of the group could voice their disagreement or raise their weapons once more, a powerful wave of Force energy washed over them. Taryn and Trista's eyes rolled up into their heads and they collapsed to the ground like stringless puppets. Raxi and Siare didn't last any longer, falling to the dirt and oil smeared ground with wordless gasps.
Zekk, to his credit, managed to last a few seconds longer; long enough to see someone emerge from the highrise behind Jaggoth. He tried to fight whatever it was that was assailing him, but it was as if thousands of minds were battering his one. His vision swam, breathing became impossible. As he fell to the ground, his last sight was of Taryn's unconscious form being dragged away.
{-[V]-} {-[V]-}
"Wake up! Wake up, damn it!" Zekk stirred, feeling someone slapping his face repeatedly, and rather hard. Some part of his brain recognized the voice, but he also heard others in his mind as well, muddling his thoughts. "Not again!"
This time an icy jolt of Force energy coursed through him, and Zekk gasped, eyes flying open as he jerked up into a seated position. A pair of hands gripped either side of his head in a firm grasp and cobalt irises held his own confused green.
"Welcome back, Zekk. Gave me quite the fright." Leaning over him with white-blond hair in disarray was Mallie Marek; dressed up in rather dirty-looking evening wear.
"Mals?" Zekk said, his mouth dry. He looked around. He was on a makeshift cot in what looked like an aid-station.
"Good, you know who I am at least."
Zekk tried to think about how he got into his predicament, but it felt as if every thought was accomplished by slogging through a mountain of mud. He groaned aloud, holding his head.

"Hang in there," Mallie said, the worry in her voice catching him off guard. In all the years he had known her, he could count on one hand the times he had felt her so concerned. "I've called for a healer from the temple."
"What…?" Zekk trailed off. The voices he had heard earlier were returning, his mind spinning. Dimly, barely aware that he was speaking, he said. "I have to go back. I'm being summoned."
Mallie swore. "Damn it, I'm not losing you to whatever it is that has its claws in you!"
Zekk shuddered as another surge of icy Force energy coursed through his head. For a few more moments, his mind was clear again, "Mallie?"
"Keep fighting it Zekk. You hear me? Keep fighting. You have some type of parasitical Force bond attached to you, and something weird going on with your body's electrical currents," Mallie hissed determinedly.
"The others?" He managed. Somehow it surprised him that he had completely forgotten about Taryn, Trista, Raxi, and Siare.
"I don't know," Mallie shook her head. "I was only able to find you because of *our* bond. Raxi and Siare are barely strong enough to register in the Force as it is and I wasn't close to the two with you."
Zekk weakly rubbed at his face. "How long was I out?"
"I found you four hours ago, unconscious. You were kept in a tank filled with some sort of weird gas. Made me dizzy breathing the stuff in for just a second, can't imagine what it did to you." Mallie answered grimly. She then allowed a small smile. "Got my fill of beating up armies of bad guys in the process though; a bit hard to do in a dress by the way. You definitely owe me, I rather liked this one too."
Zekk groaned and swung himself out of the cot, breathing heavily as he did.
"Zekk!"
"I have to get to the others. They're not as strong as I am, there's no telling what that gas will do to them." Zekk froze once more, however, hearing the voices return once more. A feeling that he was a part of something much greater than his own self filled him. A sense of peace replacing the urgency he had felt only moments earlier.
"And that's why I can't let you go down there again!" Mallie snapped. She looked to one of the others in the room. "Where's that damned healer?"
"Taryn," Zekk breathed, closing his eyes. He could suddenly hear her thoughts, feel what she was feeling. And it wasn't just her either, but Trista, Raxi, Siare, and countless others. The vastness of it was staggering, a multitude of emotions, memories, decisions, a singular

mind. It was calming, fulfilling, a sense of wholeness that he had never known before.
And suddenly that peace was shattered as the icy coolness of Mallie's Force presence barreled through it like a winter blizzard.
"What did you do that for!" Zekk yelped.
"I prefer having my ex-boyfriends sane and in control of their own minds," Mallie retorted heatedly.
Zekk felt a surge of furry and was about to lash out, when Mallie suddenly grabbed him and pressed her lips to his. Shock rushed through him, and as he realized what he had been about to do, horror swiftly followed. The fact that he had been a hairsbreadth away from actively trying to hurt her snapped him back to reality faster than anything else she could have done."Force, Mallie!"
"Like I said," Mallie breathed, brushing a reassuring hand over his cheek. "I prefer it when you're you."
Zekk inhaled deeply, reaching up to grip her hand while struggling to control his breathing and thoughts. "I still have to find the others." He managed.
"Then I'm going with you."
Zekk nodded without a word. He stood, the bed sheet covering him falling to the ground. After a split second, he paused, realizing he was missing something important. "Mallie, what happened to my clothes?"
"The gas was all over your clothes," Mallie said clinically. "I had them sent off for analysis. Not like you have anything I haven't seen before."
"That aside. No matter how messed up my mind is at the moment, I'm not going to go running through the Old City naked," Zekk said. He briefly wondered how he could lose the shirt off his back twice in one day; it had to be a new record for him. He also wondered if he should start investing in the clothing company that made his clothes. He certainly lost enough shirts in his life time, whether due to combat or unforeseen circumstances, to make someone very rich. He supposed he was fortunate that the Bornaryrn trading group helped to subsidize the Jedi Order's clothing bill.
"You could use the sheet."
Or he could always listen to his ex-girlfriend's teasing from time to time. "Mallie."
"Spare's in there," she gestured to a beat up metal container by the cot. "I'll meet you outside."
Zekk opened the container and pulled out a set of clothing that no doubt came from one of the poorer refugees in the region. On the bright side, he mused as he pulled it on, he no longer looked like a Jedi.

Emerging from the tent he had been in, he nodded to Mallie. "Didn't find my lightsaber by any chance?"
"Wasn't with you," Mallie shook her head. "You have any idea how to find the others? Those twins weren't Force-sensitive were they?"
"No," Zekk shook his head. "But whatever happened to me when I was knocked unconscious has had some very…interesting effects."
Mallie's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Zekk."
"I can almost hear both Trista and Taryn," Zekk said, closing his eyes. "Their thoughts, emotions, memories. If I focus, I can see them all. I think they can do the same with me too."
"That's it. We're getting them out of here and getting all of you off planet," Mallie said through clenched teeth.
"Don't worry," Zekk exhaled. "I think if I only focus on them, I can block everything else out."
"You better," Mallie grumbled.
The two swiftly reentered the Old City. Both were on their guard. Whatever had taken Zekk and the others out had done so almost immediately, with not a single shot fired. The parasitical Force bond still attached to her ex also had Mallie feeling queasy. It was like someone or something had built a backdoor directly into his head. Right now both her own mental figure and Zekk's were sitting on top of that figurative door, but they knew they wouldn't be able to keep it closed forever.
As they drew closer to the highrise Zekk had been knocked out in front of earlier, a definite pounding began on that door they were trying to keep shut. His movements began to become halting, his need to call on the Force to keep his head clear becoming much more frequent
"At least we know we're heading in the right direction," Zekk said, trying to smile reassuringly.
"I found you in the basement of that building," Mallie gestured towards a small outbuilding besides the highrise. "You were the only one in it though."
"I think the others are in the taller building," Zekk said, a hand reflexively going up to grip his head. "Scratch that. I *know* the others are in the taller building. Top floor."
Mallie pursed her lips. "Wait out here then."
"I can manage it," Zekk refused.
"Blast it, Zekk! This is no time to be some heroic fool!"
"Taryn and Trista are in there," Zekk argued determinedly. "I'm only getting vague impressions, but I think that whatever's trying to get control of me already has full control over them. They were exposed to

whatever was in that gas for four more hours than I was. And we still have to find Raxi and Siare while we're at it. The sooner the better."
"You…are the most frustrating man I've had the unfortunate pleasure to date!" Mallie growled, jabbing a finger in his chest. "Whoever attacked you left you in a coma for hours and hearing voices, and you want to rush right back to him?"
"I don't think the one who knocked me out is here anymore," Zekk said. "Don't ask me how I know, but I just can't *feel* him. Now, we're wasting time, can we hurry up and get to the others?"
Mallie shook her head at Zekk in complete disbelief. "Fine! But if you fall unconscious again, so help me I'll…"
Zekk silenced her with a kiss, her eyes widening in shock. "You're the best." He breathed as he pulled back.
"It's so unfair, how you can still do that to me," Mallie managed, slightly dazed. "Just…stay alive, okay? Finding you comatose in a tank full of unknown gas will give me more than my share of nightmares."
"I'll be okay, Mals," Zekk gently squeezed her hand.
"You better," Mallie grumbled again.
The two ventured closer to the highrise.
"I *really* wish I had my lightsaber,"Zekk sighed. There were all sorts of warning bells in the Force going off at once; a giant 'keep away' sign, accompanied by a neon, flashing 'danger' sign, and massive billboard with a set of skull and crossbones. It was as if the Force was saying 'Hey, I warned you. Don't blame me if things go wrong.'
The two entered the lobby. It was rundown, with water stains and broken everythings as far as the eye could see. Only a pair of crackling trashcan fires provided illumination, causing shadows to dance in every corner.
"By the way, you said I was the *most* frustrating man you've dated," Zekk said in a low voice as they navigated a set of narrow hallways. "Did you move on from me?"
"Now really isn't the best time, Zekk," Mallie rolled her eyes.
"You rather we creep through the creepily empty and dark building in complete silence?" Even the air smelled wrong, the scent of mold, excrement, and rusted metal very pungent.
"Good point." Mallie swallowed. The Force was not being any help to either of them. It was as if the entire building had been thrown out of sync with the rest of the galaxy. Everything was just one long, dark, never-ending shadow. "And yes. I've moved on. I'm going out with a perfect gentlemen, if you must know; the head of a relief organization that I've been helping out. He's running for Corulag's senate seat once

our current senator's term expires next month. You should meet him. I think the two of you will get along just swimmingly."
A breeze from nowhere whistled through the building, causing the firelight to flicker and all manner of loose objects to tumble and flap about. The heat seemed to leave the room in a rush, yet became almost unbearable at the same time.
Eyes glazed over with black film glinted in the faint lighting as a mass of individuals emerged from siderooms, hallways, and even from the torn up panels of the ceiling.
Mallie reflexively held up her lightsaber, not backing down even as the path before them was completely choked off with bodies. "Ideas, Zekk?"
Zekk didn't respond. He could feel the hammering in his head again, a need to be with the others, to protect them from intruders, outsiders. Those that didn't understand their way of life. He could be at peace with the others, his worries and cares shared by thousands, millions even. All he had to do was join them.
A strong left hook to his head sent him staggering backwards in shock. "Will you snap out of it already!" Mallie growled. "Remember why we're here. To save Raxi, Siare, and your two lady-friends. Don't make me regret bringing you here, Zekk!"
"Ouch," Zekk worked his jaw.
"You 'you' again?"
"Yeah," Zekk said, shaking the cobwebs loose.
"Good, so what are we going to do about this lot?"
"They're not in control of their minds anymore," Zekk said slowly. "Maybe, if given time, they can recover from whatever's happened to them."
"Non-lethal approach it is," Mallie shut off her lightsaber and thrust out both her hands. The Force screamed down the hallway in a powerful pressure wave, dropping the crowd before them like a Death Star beam through an asteroid. Both she and Zekk continued to advance, using the Force to incapacitate the seemingly endless mass of individuals climbing out from everywhere.
"I wonder what's wrong with them?" Zekk said, using the Force to knock several more individuals into a nearby wall. "This isn't purely Force control, something's wrong with their bodies."
"We can have the science teams look over them later," Mallie delivered an uppercut, and then elbowed another glazed-eyed person who got too close.
Though their pace was slow, and they received more than their fair share of cuts and bruises, the Jedi eventually managed to push their

way to the charred top of the building. There, a large transport was fueling, looking as if it was getting ready to take off.
"Taryn! Trista!" Zekk called out, spotting the red-heads in front of a lowered landing ramp.
"Siare, Raxi," Mallie added, addressing the younger Jedi with the red-heads.
But those four were not the only ones present. There was also Jaggoth, and a couple other glazed-eyed individuals stood by with them, all standing stalk-still. As one, the nine people turned towards the two Jedi.
"*Don't*"
"*Interfere*"
"*Mallie*"
"*Marek.*"
"*You*"
"*Have*"
"*Taken*"
"*One*"
"*Of*"
"*Ours.*
Each of the nine said one word, with the final being spoken by all of them in a frightening unison. What's more is that their voices seemed to be blended with countless others, providing an echoing effect that chilled both Mallie and Zekk to the bone.
"Taryn," Zekk tried again, taking a step forward. "It's me, Zekk."
"We know a Zekk," Taryn said, her normal gray eyes completely black. *"Zekk should be a part of us. He was to join with us."*
"The Jedi Marek is responsible for destroying the harmony," Trista said, her coolness wrapped in a shroud of anger and rage. *"She shouldn't have done that."*
"We should kill them both then," Jaggoth's four meaty hands gripped the vibroaxes and raised them high.
"No," Taryn argued. *"Zekk should be with us. We will spare him."*
"We will kill them both," another of the individuals, a gray-skinned Duros, said. *"He has rejected our gifts."*
"He knows nothing of our Colony's plans," Taryn again objected. *"He is Jedi. He will understand."*
"Just as we have," Raxi and Siare said in unison. *"But he is still linked to the Colony, he blocks us out."*
"It is the fault of Mallie Marek," Taryn's black eyes focused on Zekk's partner. *"She has taken him away from us. It is she who must die."*
"Yes, she must die," Trista agreed.

"We will deal with Jedi Zekk afterwards." Jaggoth assented amiably.
"Great," Mallie said sardonically. "I've just met her and already your new girlfriend and her family wants to kill me."
"She's not my girlfriend," Zekk instantly corrected. "And never mind that, she's under the control of something else. We should worry about that first."
"You're not the one they all want to kill," Mallie retorted. "Aren't your two women supposed to be some sort of Hapan super-commandos in training?"
"Would you quit referring to them as 'mine'?" Zekk said in exasperation . "We're just…"
"*Die!"* Jaggoth roared, charging towards Mallie like a stampeding reek. Two others, a Gamorean and a Talz, let out echoing yells; likewise streaming toward the tall blond Jedi. Mallie just sighed, held out her hand, and created a wall of Force energy. The trio crashed right into the unforgiving barrier, and collapsed as one.
Raxi and Siare's lightsabers activated. Taryn and Trista drew their weapons. Mallie made a move to engage them, but Zekk held out a hand. "Wait."
"Zekk?"
"Trust me?"
Mallie nodded slowly.
Zekk approached the remaining six individuals, hands out to the side. "You know who I am, right?"
"*You are Zekk, a Jedi,"* the Duros answered. *"The red-haired humans who were once Taryn and Trista trust you greatly."*
"You know this, how?"
"We are one mind now," Taryn spoke up. *"Everything Taryn knew, we all know. Join with us Zekk. Help us to protect the galaxy, to keep it from falling into darkness."*
Zekk felt his stomach churn. "You say everything 'Taryn knew,' are you not Taryn?"
"Taryn was who I was before she became a part of the Colony. Where before I served a single planet, I now serve the galaxy as a whole. Only the Colony can keep the silver-eyed sleeper from awakening. The Colony spread throughout this galaxy for that singular purpose. All others are inconsequential. Join with us Zekk, we need your help."
"What is this Colony? Who is this silver-eyed sleeper?"
"You will know all when you have joined," Raxi spoke. *"There is no ignorance, there is knowledge."*

"You can tell me now, and I gather my friends and allies. We can prevent the sleeper from awakening together. You don't have to be with the 'Colony' to do this."
"But we are at peace," Trista said. *"We have a purpose. Would you be so cruel as to wrench us away from that."*
"That is not the Zekk we know," Siare said aloud.
"And if I try to take you from the Colony by Force?" Zekk asked, purely out of curiosity.
"Then we will fight and kill you," the Duros spoke. *"No one is allowed to threaten our Colony before we have completed our goals."*
"Like attacking the restaurant? What purpose did that serve?"
The sixth member of the group, a human, huffed in annoyance. *"We are done talking. You will let us go now Zekk. Join with us and you will have your answers."*
Zekk released a long breath, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I'm a Jedi. Now, Mallie!"
Mallie sprung out from behind him, using the Force to both leap and increase her speed at the same time. Before any of the six could respond, she had delivered knock-out blows to both Raxi and Siare, the greatest threats, and then jammed the pommel of her lightsaber into the head of the Duros and brought an open hand strike to the back of the human's neck.
Taryn and Trista lashed out at Mallie, but Zekk used the Force and yanked the both of them over to him with a breakneck Force Pull. The two moved with the momentum of the pull, both swinging vibroblades in the process. Zekk blocked and knocked out Trista. Taryn, however, adjusted her attack to float under his arm, and cut a gash in his cheek. Zekk flinched, a small splash of blood flying out and landing on Taryn. Taryn's hand flitted once more as the blade slashed towards his neck. However, just as it began to break skin, the blade stopped. Zekk, gripping Taryn's wrist, looked down at the red-head in surprise.
"Taryn?" He said cautiously.
Her hand holding the vibroblade shook violently, but didn't relent or drop the weapon. Creases furrowed her forehead as her movements became mechanical and lost the fluidity of her earlier attacks. Slowly, jerkily, Taryn's head tilted up to look at his face.
Taryn swallowed once, an almost desperate look of terror flickering across her face as she managed to wheeze. "Stop me."
Her eyes were gray for a fraction of a second. Then they were suddenly completely black once more, and she lashed out with her booted foot, catching Zekk off-guard. She lunged at him with the blade again, but

this time a stun-bolt race across the top of the roof and hit the young warrior with unerring accuracy.
The sound of the stun shot was deafening, silencing all action and motion. Both Zekk and Mallie, the only two still conscious, glanced in the direction of the shot and saw a Galactic Alliance Assault shuttle hovering at roof-level. Intelligence Director Belindi Kalenda, clad in full-body armor, was lowering a heavy blaster as three more shuttles appeared. Ropes were lowered, and soldiers began to repel down onto the roof, or breach through the broken windows of the highrise.
"Thank you, Jedi Zekk, for clearing this building. We could not have done this as bloodlessly as you have done," Belindi said professionally, leaping out from the shuttle and onto the roof. She was flanked by several muscular soldiers, all armed to the teeth. "Am I correct to think that you would prefer Ms. Zel alive?"
"Yes," Zekk said stonily. "What are you doing here?"
"Investigating a tragic speeder accident by going to the home of one of the drivers," Belindi said off-handedly. "The five I sent in earlier ceased contact, so I thought I'd drop by to see what was wrong."
"Director," Mallie's eyes were narrowed. "Do you mean to tell me that you knew of the threat here and let Zekk and the others go in?"
"It is not my responsibility to keep track of the Jedi and their actions," Belindi said coolly. "Nor am I responsible for any thoughts I may have been vigorously thinking when I was in their presence. Besides, things worked out rather well, don't you think?"
"Director." Mallie growled.
"Oh, by the way, Jedi Zekk, you'll be wanting these." Belindi held out several vials.
"What are they?" Zekk said suspiciously, realizing that he had drastically underestimated her.
"A counter to the chemical agent you and your friends were given," Belindi answered. "This isn't the first flophouse my men have found on Denon. More like the tenth. I only know when one exists when my investigators go missing. Now, as much as I appreciate the assist this time, can you refrain from investigating any further speeder crashes in the future? The last thing we need is for a Jedi to be swayed by the drug."
Zekk cautiously injected one of the vials into himself, feeling an odd floating sensation only seconds later. The hammering in his head ceased, and he gradually felt the urge to *join* Jaggoth's group subside.
"You're lucky, Jedi Zekk," Belindi continued. "Those exposed to concentrated doses of whatever this drug is begin to see changes in the structure of their brain. As kind as you were in stunning everyone

downstairs, they're now destined for labs to determine just how and what this drug is."
"Mals?" Zekk looked up to Mallie.
She scanned him with the Force, and nodded once. "It's safe."
Zekk injected the remaining two vials into Taryn and Trista, while Mallie bent over Raxi and Siare.
"I'm feeling in a giving mood today, Jedi Zekk," Belindi said. "So would you accept a ride back to the Jedi Temple? I think you've done enough today, haven't you?"
Zekk nodded, supporting both Taryn and Trista's unconscious forms against his. What was supposed to be a simple investigation had evidently turned out to be much bigger than even he had expected. One thing was for certain though, he had had enough of Denon's Old City for a very long while.
{-[VI]-} {-[VI]-}
Zekk sat between Taryn and Trista's medical beds, lost in thought. Jedi Temple healer Gruu Dunwik and visiting healer Bardan Jusik had done their best for the twins, as well as Raxi and Siare, but only time would tell if they would be okay. He wasn't much of a healer or scientist himself, but from what he could understand of their diagnosis, the four had been subjected to an intense, prolonged chemical bath of some sort, with electro-stimulation to help mold their brains. One of the Yuuzhan Vong shapers within the temple likened it to Shaping, where the brain was made malleable by the chemicals, and then re-wired to serve some purpose. What that purpose was, however, was anyone's guess.
Zekk had been thoroughly debriefed by Galactic Alliance Intelligence on the ride over to the temple, and then again by several worried members of the Jedi High Council. Taryn's haunting words about the Colony being spread throughout the galaxy, about her trying to stop a silver-eyed sleeper from awakening, were more than a little disturbing. Zekk knew that this was far from over. But at the moment, he just wanted to get Taryn and Trista far away from any mind-controlling drugs and disruptive Force users.
Taryn stirred, her hands closing around the handles of her vibroknives that Zekk had planted. The doctors had objected, but Zekk argued that they would help calm her down as she came to. An armed and dangerous Taryn was a lot better than a scared and defenseless Taryn. It seemed to work, because the moment she recognized the familiar handles, the tension in her body eased.
"Zekk?" Taryn whispered.
"Hey." Zekk angled his chair towards her bed.

She released one of the vibroblades and reached a hand out towards the direction of his voice. "Hi."
"How do you feel?"
"Head feels weird," Taryn answered, her eyes still closed. "Like it's stuffed with cotton."
"Do you remember anything?"
"I don't know," Taryn breathed. "I remember going down to the Old City. Getting knocked out, and then waking up in some sort of tank. A sweet smelling aroma…and then…nothing. But I guess things worked out for the better if you're here. Are *you* okay. Is Trista?"
"Trista's still sleeping," Zekk rubbed his thumb along the back of her hand. "And I'm fine. Focus on getting better first."
"How was I knocked out?" Taryn said, her tone changing from worried to disgruntled. "No one's been able to knock me out that easily, even in the full-contact sparring matches back on Hapes."
"The Force," Zekk answered, chuckling softly. Now that everyone she cared for was fine, the only thing left was her wounded pride.
"Of course," Taryn grumbled. She lifted an eyelid to look at him with a clear gray eye. "When we get back to Hapes, you're going to teach Trista and I how to fight off Force techniques. We can't go fainting like fragile flowers if some Force sensitive assassin tries to get at the Queen Mother. And we'll certainly not be so easy targets again for whoever knocked us out this time around."
"Tenel Ka checked in on you two earlier. Said you weren't supposed to take your orders to keep me safe so literally," Zekk smiled, squeezing Taryn's hand affectionately. "She's also debating whether she should reschedule her flight back to Hapes."
"No," this time Trista spoke. "No, we can go with her today. We're not going to let the *chume'da* wait any longer to enter this galaxy."
Zekk turned and made a sound of exasperation when he realized that she had swung her legs out of the bed and was trying to stand.
"Trista!"
"I'll…be fine," Trista wobbled.
Zekk stood by, but didn't intervene. He knew that both Zel twins prided themselves for their independence and willpower. It didn't mean they didn't need catching if they fell, that was what he was for, but he had no desire to take away any of that independence and inner strength from them.
Trista swayed, her hand reaching out to grip his shoulder as she steadied herself. She let go, giving Zekk a singular nod of thanks. He could tell that she was just as shaken as her sister, but was able to

hide it much better. After all, Taryn was the heart of the duo, and Trista the logical, dutiful half.
The doors to the room opened, and an emotionless mask slid over her face.
"Master Jusik," Zekk inclined his head. He briefly saw Taryn swing her legs over the side of her own bed.
The former Republic Jedi-turned Mandalorian-turned New Jedi Order Jedi Healer-turned Mandalorian-turned part-time Jedi, having been alerted by the awakening of his patients, raised an eyebrow. "Jedi Zekk."
"These two plan to be on a shuttle later tonight. Will they be okay?" Bardan eyed the two clinically. "Keep hydrated, plenty of rest, and no more exposure to tanks full of pheromones, and they'll be fine."
"Pheromones?" Trista said in alarm. "What sort?"
"Finished the analysis on the traces embedded in your clothing; definitely organic compounds, naturally occurring too. You two have *mandokar* to be up and about this early after almost having your brains re-wired."
"We're Hapan," Taryn gritted out, gripping Zekk's opposite arm as she too steadied herself. "Takes more than mind-altering substances to keep us down."
"He's lucky to have you two," Bardan snorted, gesturing to Zekk.
"We're not together!" The trio objected in unison, their cheeks turning pink. They all blinked, looked at each other, then looked away quickly.
"Clean bill of health then?" Zekk asked hastily.
"Not quite," Bardan's expression became serious. "You three, and Siare and Raxi, have some residuals that might or might not fade in time. In all honesty, this is my first time seeing something like this. Not only were you linked through the Force, but also chemically, electrically, and quite literally, magnetically. The serum you were given handles the chemical part of the equation, Dunwik and I took care of the Force part and helped stop any changes being made to your heads. But there's still an odd electro-magnetic field that's surrounding you."
"What does that mean?"
"Don't know," Bardan answered gruffly. "Like I said, this is my first time seeing something like this. I'll have to check the archives at Ossus for more answers. That's my next stop. But a guess? You'll find yourselves better coordinated with each other, might even be able to sense each other's emotions. Whatever happens though, will definitely be noticeable. Oh, and if you have any biometric locks, you might want to have them reset. The electrical currents in your bodies were completely changed as a result of whatever you were put through."

"Thanks for your help, Master Jedi," Trista bowed politely. For once, Taryn followed suit, bowing solemnly without a hint of spunkiness that she usually showed.
Bardan made a sound of annoyance. "Just doing my job. Now don't you people have a ship to catch?"
The Mandalorian Jedi Master left the room, and both Taryn and Trista abruptly sagged against Zekk, nearly pulling him down with them.
"Are you sure you'll be up for the trip?" Zekk said dryly, wrapping an arm around either of them to keep them supported.
"We'll be fine," Trista nodded, resting her forehead against his chest. "Just need to recover our strength."
"Can you do that Jedi thing to give us a little boost?" Taryn said, tilting her head back up.
Zekk gently placed a kiss on each forehead and infused their bodies with rejuvenating Force energy. "Not a problem."
"Think this will be the last we'll see of the crazy mind-controlling pheromone people?" Taryn asked, taking an experimental step back from Zekk, and then another when her strength held up.
Trista did the same. "Whatever it is, Galactic Alliance Intel barely has control over the situation. There's no doubt things will only get worse before a solution will present itself."
"That's a 'no' then," Taryn replied sarcastically. "Oh goody. That means I get a chance to give the guy who knocked us out a good boot in his…"
"Like Bardan said, we have a shuttle to catch," Zekk interrupted. "But Trista's right. This is probably only the beginning. The Force is telling me that we haven't seen the last of this, not by a long shot."
"You're worried?" Taryn blinked in surprise, realizing that she could actually feel just how deep his concern went.
"Yeah," Zekk breathed. "The one that attacked us was strong in the Force, much stronger than I've ever seen or felt before. I think…think the longer we go without meeting him again the better. At least not until we're ready."
"Then we'll train on Hapes," Trista said firmly. "We train, get better, and be ready when disaster finally strikes. That's all we *can* do until the villains show themselves."
"And we *will* be ready," Taryn said with a determined nod. "We'll be ready and face it together and make them regret trying to mess up the galaxy on our watch."
{-[Chapter End]-}

Corellia

{-[I]-} {-[I]-}

Jysella Horn spun around gracefully as up-tempo music blared from the HoloNet receiver in the wood-paneled room. Large rectangular windows that ran the length of the room gave her a breathtaking view of a forest-lined lake, the sun just beginning to shine about the snow-capped mountains in the distance. She and Valin had inherited their great-grandfather's house upon his passing shortly after the end of the war, turning it into a diplomatic mission befitting of their role as Jedi Ambassadors to Corellia. It was a sprawling estate within the mountains outside of Coronet, sheltered and out of the way from the hustle and bustle of the capital city.

She and Valin had spent their post-war years helping Corellia recover from its brief Yuuzhan Vong occupation, and helping CorSec keep the system secure from pirates and anyone else who might want to take advantage of the situation. It was tiresome work, especially with the post-war influx of refugees looking for homes and jobs. It didn't seem like a day could go by without one Corellian senator or another trying to pass a bill imprisoning the hundreds of thousands of refugees, forcing them into indentured servitude, stripping the rights of these planet-less peoples, or banning/deporting them outright. The jingoism that had purveyed the planet during the war had yet to cease, and the Corellians were very protective of their identity. Just the other week, Jysella had to break up a 'Pure Corellia' nationalistic group that had been wreaking havoc on one of the many refugee camps set up on the planet. To say that their job was a pain was definitely an understatement.

To top it off, two years earlier, the Horn family had even started the Corellian Jedi Praxeum. It was a monument of pride to the Corellians, to have something that even Taspir III or Mon Cal didn't have—a place to train Jedi. Corellian Senator Charr Brak was more than supportive of the Praxeum, even offering to use post-war reconstruction funds to build a palace 'fitting for the Jedi of Corellia.' His offer had been declined, of course, but funds were discovered through other means. Where Rostek Horn's estate was a place for Valin and Jysella to live and handle political matters, the Corellian Praxeum was a place to train the first generation of Corellia-born and bred Jedi Knights.

The number of Jedi at the Jedi Praxeum of Corellia was not at all impressive or imposing. There were eight fully trained Jedi—three masters and five Knights—and almost twice that number in Jedi Initiates and Apprentices. While Jysella was unofficially in charge of all things political, the Jedi Masters and other knights handled the actual instruction of the Jedi Initiates and Apprentices.

The praxeum was a work-in-progress on many levels. The actual building was still under construction, and despite complimentary teaching styles of the Masters in charge, those of the praxeum were still trying to define themselves. But even before it was fully finished, the praxeum was already unique in more ways than one. Not only was it the *only* Jedi Praxeum in the Core, it was also the only one to be located in the heart of a city, smack dab in the center of Coronet. Unlike the other praxeums, Jysella and the others also had to deal with local planetary politics and all the troubles that went with starting up on a planet with a population of nearly eight billion.

Not that it was all bad.

The Corellian politicians were really buying into the idea of making the Jedi Praxeum an integral part of their planet's culture, and had grand designs for it. As a way of saving money, much of the building was made from debris of Corellian buildings destroyed in the war. The foundation itself was from the Corellian Center of Arts and Culture, which had taken a direct plasma hit during the brief but fierce fight for the planet. While other parts came from schools or workshops that had likewise been damaged from an orbital strike. The combination of materials gave the outside of the praxeum an almost mural-like appearance, and supplied a very poetic motif of Jedi and Corellia rising out of the ashes together. Emerald, transparasteel panels were affixed to the outside walls like armored plating, turning the building into a giant beacon of green light when the sun hit it just right. When it was finished, the praxeum would stand at a proud sixty-stories tall and boast speeder-landing platforms and its own docking bays. It would be entirely self-sufficient, with its own food-growing facilities, armory, tech-bays, library, and everything the Corellian politicians envisioned the Jedi would need.

Of course, in their rush to build this grand future, the politicians were often very forgetful about the present, leaving it up to the beleaguered Jedi to care for those overlooked or ignored. And given that there were only eight fully trained Jedi on the planet, they more than had their work cut out for them. The praxeum drew their students from Corellia itself, as well as from the refugee camps and ships in Corellian territory. Ranging from nine to fourteen years of age, much of their lessons had been the hands-on, in-the-field sort: using the Force to read emotional states, to help under-funded construction crews lift bundles of pipes or walls, to track down con-men and corrupt politicians, and Jysella's least favorite, to pose for media pictures without letting it go to their young heads.

It was hard not to let the fame get to the young Corellian Jedi when the politicians were trumpeting them as Corellia's next personal saviors and heroes, when refugees tried to give thanks by offering whatever they could after a good deed was done, or when the media constantly asked when these Corellian Jedi would take their next steps and put the Corellian Praxeum into the galactic spotlight.
Needless to say, dancing had definitely saved her sanity. All her stress and tension just bled away when she was in tune with the music, with the pulsating Force energies of all the wildlife and plants outside the house. She could forget about politicians, about the media, about being the poster-child for Corellia's new future. It was just her and the music, her and the Force.
Her mind briefly wandered to the person who had first taught her how to connect to the Force in such a way. Alema Rar, now a fugitive with a ten million credit bounty on her head. The Twi'lek hadn't been seen since the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War, and there were rumors that she had died. Lone Force sensitives in the war never really lasted long against the Jedi-hating invaders.
But Jysella didn't believe that. She knew in her heart that the woman she had seen as her older sister was still alive. During the night, she could sometimes feel Alema's Force presence tug on her own, as if using it as an anchor. At first Jysella had dismissed it as a trick of her mind, a hope that Alema was reaching out for her. But then after the tugs became more frequent, she just embraced them, letting the presence she believed was Alema draw whatever she needed from her. Unlike most others, Jysella had never believed that Alema had 'gone dark'. The Twi'lek she had come to know wasn't like that at all. And it was her faith in Alema, Jysella believed, that kept the two of them connected no matter where the rogue Twi'lek had disappeared to.
Jysella took another breath, sweeping her arms out and back in as she began to distance herself from the music playing in the background and delve into the Force. She could feel the trees sway, the fish in the lake, the birds in the air, each with their own unique rhythm. It was as if the building had faded away from around her and she was in the center of the forest, dancing alongside the deer and other wildlife.
Feet slid across the ground. A leaping split. She rose up onto her toes and pirouetted. Her arms stretched out into the air, twining and twirling, her body in tune with the Force. Almost effortlessly she combined the standard lightsaber forms into her dance, twisting and arching her torso around invisible opponents. Her arms swung about as if they held lightsabers, before drawing her arms back in in a comforting embrace. She danced the length of the room, the sunlight

flicking across her as it shone through the towering array of windows; turning the room golden with its light. She was at peace, had not a care in the world. It didn't matter how much time was passing, when she started dancing, she was in a world all of her own.
Yet she wasn't completely unaware of the outside world. A small smile fluttered across her features as she felt a new life-force join the harmony she was dancing to. It was a familiar presence and wholly welcomed. She continued to dance, well aware that he was watching her from one of the doors to the room. Finally, the music from the HoloNet player died away.
With one last spin, Jysella came to a stop before her audience of one. It was her on-again-off-again boyfriend. They were currently in their 'off-again' phase, being 'just friends' despite what Valin and anyone else might have thought.
"Morning, Tarc," Jysella smiled, breathing heavily.
"Sella," the twenty-year old shuttle pilot held up a bag. "Brought breakfast."
Jysella raised an eyebrow and snagged a light shirt to throw on over her dance clothing. "You bringing me breakfast at this hour, that's never a good sign."
"Figured you'd want some food before meeting the Prime Minister and the Corellian Ministers' Council. Didn't you tell me something important was probably going to go down?"
"Gimme," Jysella grabbed at the bag and rifled through its contents. "Almost forgot about that meeting."
"I'm sure they'd be flattered."
"Please, how can one forget Her Excellency, Aidel Saxan?" Jysella said, biting into a bagel. "Val and I did help her get elected."
"Didn't do much to lessen the 'rah rah Corellia', people."
"Didn't get her elected for her backbone," Jysella said dryly. "She's good with economics, knows politics and how to get people to do what has to be done. You've seen the stats, in the two years since she's been elected, crime is down, reconstruction efforts of the surrounding planets are up, as are the job numbers. Corellia's become a major mover and shaker in the relief efforts of this part of the galaxy."
"Hey, not complaining," Tarc held out his hands. "I voted for her too. It's the guy she placed as Minister of Internal Affairs that's causing the problems."
"Dur Gejjen? I know," Jysella finished eating and dressing at the same time. "But he's also good at what he does. He's kept most of the pro-Corellians from harassing the refugees, and has been more than

generous with Corellia's resources in supporting the nearly two billion refugees caught up in the Five Worlds.
"He's been ruffling a lot of feathers by taxing the rich and giving their money to charity. This leaves a lot of angry rich people with too much time on their hands. We wouldn't have so many pro-Corellians if he didn't siphon the money of the rich and powerful to the refugee camps and poor."
"You're against that?" Jysella arched an eyebrow.
"Just the fact that we're solving problems by creating them in a seemingly endless cycle," Tarc replied. They piled into his atmospheric flier. "It's only a matter of time before enough people get angry at him, and by extension, the administration he works for. Then Saxan gets voted out and poof, there goes the Jedi's number one ally."
"Oh, so you're just worried about me," Jysella smirked slyly.
Tarc rolled his eyes. "I've never stopped, Sella. You're a Jedi, nothing you do is small in scale."
"Remind me again why we're taking a break?"
"Jedi Academy, handful of kid-Jedi, two billion refugees…Take your pick," Tarc laughed. "And I do have a tour business to run. Mom and dad are giving me more responsibility every day."
"Right," Jysella groaned. She stretched out her arms as the in-progress Jedi Praxeum came into view. It was coming along slowly but surely. Most of the crew working on it were volunteers, taking their personal time between jobs to contribute something to the building; or as the local HoloNet put it, 'doing their patriotic duty.'
"Pick you up same time as yesterday?" Tarc piloted his ship into the landing bay.
"Maybe an hour later. I'll be headed to Kolene later on today to help several of the refugees out with a dubious labor contract, and then to Bela Vistal to help the locals with a band of refugees ruining the landscape," Jysella rolled her eyes at the obvious irony of tasks.
"CorSec not up to it?"
"CorSec prefers to blast such groups first, ask questions if there's any survivors later," Jysella deadpanned. "I currently have one of the Corellian apprentices and Natua out there keeping the peace. They're supposed to be going off world for another assignment in the greater galaxy though, so I'm going to relieve them and do my Jedi magic out there."
"I would say 'good luck,' but you're both Corellian and Jedi, so I doubt you'll need it."
"Thanks," Jysella laughed, sliding out of the ship. "See you later."

"Yup," Tarc gave her a wave, then steered the ship back out the hangar to join the rest of the air-traffic of Coronet.
Jysella waved at Tarc's ship until it was just a speck in the distance. Once it was gone, she rotated back around and headed towards the building's turbolift.
Despite it being just another day at the office, something in the Force was telling her that the day would be far from uneventful.
{-[II]-} {-[II]-}
"Hmmm…Fondor, Adumar, Bespin, and Commenor." Jysella reviewed the meeting's minutes with a troubled frown creasing her forehead. As strong an ally as Prime Minister Aidel Saxan was, she was pure Corellian. And like most Corellians, she marched to her own tune. Barely touched by the four-year war that had ravaged the galaxy, Corellia had emerged in the enviable position of having the stability and resources most other systems desperately needed. With the Galactic Alliance foundering, the Chief of State on his way out, and the rest of the galaxy in turmoil, Corellia was like an inviting oasis in a desert.
With surplus food stores, ships, medical supplies, and construction material, Corellia and her leadership were taking advantage of the obvious power vacuum and snapping up allies of its own.
In exchange for their missile-production capabilities, Corellia sent Adumar a constant supply of food and tech.
Fondor, the necessary equipment needed to repair their defunct shipyards.
Bespin traded tabana gas for tariff free trade and access to the economies of Corellia and her allies.
Commenor's pirate problems were banished with a heavy Corellian Defense Fleet presence. In exchange, the lucrative markets available to Commenor became available to Corellia as well.
It didn't seem like a week could go by without another system turning to Corellia for help instead of the Galactic Alliance.
Jysella knew that she should be okay with it. If Corellia had the capability to help others, to make the galaxy a better place, *shouldn't* she support its efforts? The Jedi Order was supposedly neutral in all matters between the Galactic Alliance and its members. Was supposed to stay out of interfering with local governments unless the governments threatened galactic peace. Some part of Jysella knew, however, that that was what the Order told itself to help it sleep better at night.
In truth, ever since the Yuuzhan Vong War, whether it meant to or not, the Jedi Order had become a prominent political force throughout the

galaxy. The High Council now held more power, more say over what the Galactic Alliance would do, than the entire Senate.
And half of that council was made up of Jedi.
Then again, without the Jedi, what would have happened to the galaxy? Could the Jedi just give up their political power, retreat to their own praxeums, and hope that the corruption and darkness would stay away? Not that it mattered much now anyways. With the Galactic Alliance's power dwindling, the High Council seemingly too far removed from the rest of the galactic population, the 'Jedi Ambassadors' and praxeums were being forced to shift their focus, their ideologies, to go along with the changing times.
Aidel Saxan had been one of five people running for the Prime Minister seat.
Aidel Saxan had been the only one Jysella and Valin had helped to get elected.
The reason had been fairly simple; of the five politicians running for the office, Aidel was the most efficient, economically and politically savvy, and pro-Jedi. And Corellia had benefited greatly with Aidel at the helm; its wealth tripling, allies growing in number, and influence at record levels.
Yet Corellia had never lost its ultra-nationalistic swagger that it had picked up at the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War; becoming very bellicose, quadrupling enlistment for CorSec and CorDef, allowing the refugees to fill the ranks of their armed forces in exchange for citizenship. Several smaller systems had already been 'persuaded' to join the growing Corellian alliance with Corellian warships high in orbit above their capital planet. At the same time, there was no denying the security it was providing to these planets it annexed.
Her holocom unit pinged, stirring her from her musings. The unit was about as tall as the room, ensuring life-sized holo-images of whoever was calling.
"Jedi Knight Jysella Horn, go ahead."
"*Jysella."*
"Your Majesty," Jysella's eyebrows shot up at the sight of the Queen Mother of Hapes appearing in her office. "This…is unexpected. What can I do for you?"
"*We would like to lodge a complaint, Jedi Ambassador to Corellia,"* Tenel Ka said stiffly, a hand resting on the developing child in her stomach.
Jysella grimaced at the icy hostility underlying Tenel Ka's words. "Go ahead."

"*Please ask the Prime Minister why Corelllian vessels have been attacking and hijacking Hapan-flagged vessels the moment they leave our territory. There have already been twelve such incidents in the past week, the latest three occurring <u>within</u> Hapan space. We will not stand for such blatant violation of our territory and the rights of our people.*"
"I'll see if I can't get to the bottom of this," Jysella said quickly. "As patriotic as the Corellians are, even they don't want another war after what happened seven years ago."
"*Do so. Our patience is running thin and Hapes <u>will</u> defend herself if these acts of provocation continue.*"
The call ended, and Jysella slumped back into her chair with a groan. She stared up at the light fixture as she ran her hand through her hair in frustration. "Prime Minister, just what are you doing now?"
No sooner had she said that, than the holocom pinged once more. "You've reached the Corellian Praxeum, Jedi Knight Jysella Horn, speaking."
"*Caught you at a bad time?*"
"Sorry, Prime Minister," Jysella tilted her head apologetically. "Just received some disturbing news regarding Corellian relations with the Hapes Consortium."
"*This is an odd coincidence. That is precisely why I am calling you now. Can you bring the senior Jedi of your praxeum to the capitol building as soon as possible? There is a matter of grave importance we must discuss.*"
"How urgent is it, Madame Minister? My father is currently on Gus Talon with two apprentices, and Master Krahnn is at his home with his family. The others are all spread out on assignment as well."
"*Very urgent. In the next few weeks it is highly likely Corellia and Hapes will go to war.*"
Jysella sat frozen in her seat for several long seconds. Finally, she swallowed and nodded. "I'll get word out immediately. But it will still be at least a day or two before we can all meet."
"*My ministers and I will be ready when you are.*"
{-[III]-} {-[III]-}
Jysella exchanged solemn nods as the Jedi Knights and Masters of the Corellian Praxeum arrived one by one. Sensing her seriousness, no pleasantries were exchanged. With cautious curiosity, they entered the capitol building of Corellia; a sprawling, towering estate decked out in Corellian banners bearing pro-Corellian symbols and phrases. It had taken several days to recall everyone, and in the interim, Tenel Ka had shot her several more angry, impatient messages about the

deteriorating state of affairs between Corellia and Hapes. Jysella supposed she was lucky that things had held out for as long as they had.
"You've brought your apprentice with you?" Jysella said in a low voice to her long-time friend, Jedi Knight Natua Wan.
The Falleen nodded once and brushed an affectionate hand over the head of a nine-year old Selonian girl at her side. "I keep no secrets from her. To her people, lies and secrets are akin to what murder and rape is to us. She will learn what we will learn, and she will someday understand why we respond as we do."
Jysella knelt down in front of the young Selonian. "And how are you doing today, Jedi Initiate Shrona Ruluwoor?"
"Sleepy," the nine-year old said, innocent black eyes blinking as the polecat-like creature rubbed at her snout. "We spent all day trying to get refugees and Corellians to be nice to each other. I still don't understand why they can't get along and help each other when they now share the same den-planet."
"Don't worry," Jysella grinned, returning to her full height. "I don't understand it either. Come on, I don't know what news the Prime Minister has for us apart from the possibility of a war, so we should go to her as quick as we can."
While the trio caught up with the rest of the Jedi, Jysella's sharp eyes took in the other occupants of the capitol building.
"A lot of soldiers," Natua voiced as several squads of Corellian Defense personnel exited out a side-door to an awaiting transport. "It is strange, but I have the feeling that the decision to go to war has already been made."
"Great," Jysella groaned, and added under her breath. "Why can't the leaders of my home-planet *not* be power-crazy for once?"
The contingent of Jedi passed through a pair of heavy wooden doors at the heart of the building, acknowledging the ministers gathered around a rectangular table within with silent nods of their heads.
"Thank you for coming Jedi, I apologize for pulling you away from your assignments," Prime Minister of Corellia, Aidel Saxan, began from her seat at the head of the table.
"Jedi Knight Horn mentioned something about a war?" Master Corask Slen'da said mildly taking a seat along with the others.
"Yes," Corellian Defense Minister Rorf Willems answered. "With the Hapan Consortium. Or elements of it to be more precise."
"Perhaps, you should start at the beginning," Corran Horn prompted.
"And we shall," Minister of Intelligence and Director of CorSec, Gavele Lemora, said curtly. She pressed a button and a holographic display

rose out of the center of the table. "As you are aware, five years ago, the Hutts lost control of all their space save Nal Hutta. In the interim, both Bothawui and Hapes have been dividing what was previously Hutt Space among them."
"Following you so far," Valin Horn nodded.
"Four years ago, elements of the Hapan Nobility began reaching out to the government of Corellia. With the decline of the Galactic Alliance, they were worried about the well-being of the Consortium should the Alliance collapse. As the Galactic Alliance deteriorated and Corellia grew stronger over the course of time, the elements of concerned nobility grew in number as well. Many are too afraid to act out in the open, however, given that the Queen Mother is a Jedi and that the Consortium has both Jedi and Galactic Alliance support. At the time, Corellia was unwilling to involve itself in the internal affairs of a foreign power."
"I can see where this is going, but go on," Master Matarmeno Krahnn spoke in his customary soft voice, hands folded on the table in front of him.
"As the situation continued to deteriorate, the elements of Hapan nobility made us a second offer," Aidel Saxan took over. "They are willing to give us access to the resources and trade routes in both Hutt Space and the Hapan Consortium in exchange for Corellian protection and support. At present, the Galactic Alliance is ill-equipped to manage the resources the Consortium currently sends them, losing much of it to corruption and bureaucratic stalling. If Corellia gains access to those resources, however, the worlds we can help, the people we can tend to, those numbers can almost double overnight."
"And the Queen Mother isn't inclined to agree to such a treaty," Natua said tonelessly.
"You are correct, Jedi Knight Wan," Intelligence Minister Gavele answered. "Last year, we sent an offer to the Queen Mother, stability and support in exchange for the Consortium's resources and trade routes. In her response, she said that Hapes does not let anyone dictate their foreign policy to them and is perfectly capable of managing its own trade routes and resources."
"Frankly, I believe the Queen Mother and her supporters are being selfish," Minister of Internal Affairs Dur Gejjen scowled. "We have the means and capability to see to it that Hapes' supplies are better used, but she is letting her pride and tradition get in the way."
"So where does this 'war' come in, Madame Minister?" Jysella asked as politely as she could.

"Our allies on Hapes have managed to secure the support of fifty-one percent of its nobility. Corellia cannot just stand by and let a close-minded young queen waste what could be used to help billions. Not when there are Hapans with the same goals as us."
"You're going to support a coup," Corran summed up bluntly.
"It's what is best for the galaxy, don't you think, Master Jedi? Even you can see the logic in our reasoning. The Galactic Alliance is barely holding together as it is. Corellia can become the foundation that props it back up, but only if we have the resources to do so? Are we to let Hapan resources be ill-managed and squandered because of politics? Because the Hapans are allies to the Jedi Order and therefore untouchable? Tell me, what would you have me do, then? Because for my ministers and myself, this is the best course of action, for both Corellia and Hapes."
"The Jedi Order is supposed to be politically neutral, am I right?" Minister of Justice, Denjax Teppler, spoke up. "They should not care if Hapes has a change in ruler, nor should they care for what Corellia intends to do, because we are not disrupting the galactic peace. Corellia is simply righting a wrong, bringing itself to a position to better help the billions of disenfranchised refugees and dozens of ravaged worlds."
"It sounds as if you are already committed to this," Corran said tiredly. "Why is it that you've called us here then? I doubt it was to ask for permission."
"As strange as it sounds, Master Horn," Aidel smiled faintly. "Corellia respects the word of her Jedi. You have but to say the word and we'll call off our forces. We'll let things return to the status quo. But there will still be dissatisfied nobles on Hapes, still be billions of mouths that could otherwise have been fed. Corellia has a chance to make its mark on this galaxy, Master Horn, as helpers, builders, making this galaxy right again. We would like your blessings to continue with our current course of action. Your support in the war that is to come."
"Is it possible to talk with Corellia's Hapan allies first?" Master Matarmeno Krahnn asked. "To hear their side and understanding of events."
"Of course," Aidel assented. She activated the holocom and dimmed the lights in the room as the group waited for the connection to go through.
A few seconds later, the holographic images of two women appeared. Both wore luxurious clothing that screamed 'nobility' and appeared every much like two women in positions of great power. *"Prime*

Minister, this is an unexpected honor. To what do we owe the pleasure of your call?"
"Ducha AlGray, Ducha Galney," Aidel smiled politely. "I'm trying to get Corellia's Jedi on board. I think they're mostly convinced but needed to hear things from a Hapan perspective."
"*The Jedi? Prime Minster, is this wise?"* Ducha AlGray adjusted the visor obscuring her eyes from view. The tactical visor was the only part of her wardrobe that didn't seem to match the rest of her.
"Don't worry, Ducha. They've promised to hear things out first. Go on, explain to them our deal."
"*Well, Jedi,*" the Ducha Galney said, straightening and folding her hands in her lap. *"I am sure the Prime Minister has explained the gist of things. According to Hapan tradition, we have enough support among the nobility to legally challenge the Queen Mother and the Ruling Family. Should Corellia help my council assume control of Hapes, the Consortium and its holdings in Hutt Space will be theirs to distribute out to the rest of the galaxy. We prefer the coup to be as bloodless as possible, but much of the Royal Navy is still loyal to the Queen Mother, so we are not naïve enough to think that it can be done without blood being spilt. Should the Jedi help, however, that will go a long way to keeping casualties at the minimal."*
"Don't get ahead of yourself, Ducha," Corran said sternly. "We won't fight a war for you, nor have we committed ourselves just yet. The Jedi Order..."
"Is sworn to serve the well-being of this galaxy."
"Sworn to serve the Force."
"Is that not the same thing?" Galney questioned. *"The Queen Mother may have once been a Jedi, but these days she is a politician first and foremost. When tyrannical politicians threaten the well-being of billions, is it not the job of the Jedi to help remove them from power?"*
"Let us try to negotiate with her first," Jysella spoke. "She's not so removed from being a Jedi that she'll ignore the countless people an alliance can help."
"If that were possible, we would have done so already. But she is firm in her belief of Hapan sovereignty, places great value in its allegiance to the Galactic Alliance. She sees Corellia as a bully, someone that can't be negotiated with; but we of the Heritage Council know better. "
"You can't seriously be asking for our blessing for what you are about to do?" Valin spoke up incredulously. "War and Jedi are not meant to go together. We only just emerged from a war that nearly destroyed this galaxy. Haven't you learned anything from that?"

"You are one to talk, Jedi." Ducha AlGray scoffed. *"Were not the Jedi involved in the removal of the military leaders of the Tion Hegemony? Did they not help place Corellia's current government into power? Help the Galactic Alliance attain its current shape? You Jedi preach and extol the virtues of peace and unity, but reality is much, much harsher. Being at the center of Corellia in the Core, surely you can see that not everything is as black and white as you are trying to make it out to be? Friends sometimes go astray, allies are not always right. Are you going to be so hypocritical as to claim neutrality when you are right in the middle of so much suffering and need? It's more than understandable that the other Jedi schools on the Outer Rim, your leaders of the High Council in the gilded halls of the capital, will be out of touch and removed from current events, but you have no excuse. The choice is simple; help us, or not."*

A silence fell over the table at the Ducha's words, the Jedi struggling to keep their faces as impassive as ever. The Corellian Ministers likewise appeared to be holding their breaths, nervously glancing to one stone-faced Jedi to another in an attempt to garner some clues as to what they may be thinking.

Finally, the silence was ended by Natua. "I do not speak for my fellow *Corellian* Jedi, but my apprentice and I will assist you in this endeavor."

This time the other Jedi were unable to hide their shock, all but one openly gaped at Natua in alarm. The only one not to, likewise nodded.

"I may be old, but I still have a word or two of wisdom I can offer," Master Matarmeno Krahnn said, his voice barely audible.

"Thank you, the two of you."

"Natua, this might put us in conflict with our friends, the rest of the Order," Jysella said in alarm.

The Falleen remained as emotionless as ever as she tilted her head in acknowledgement. "The Ducha is right, should Corellia gain access to Hapan resources, more people than before can be helped. She is also correct in pointing out that the Queen Mother is no longer a Jedi first, otherwise such an intervention wouldn't be necessary. Once the rest of the Order puts their feelings aside, they will see that the removal of the current Queen Mother from her throne is the best course of action."

"The Ducha has also pointed out that much of the Hapan nobility remains dissatisfied with the current ruler," Master Krahnn said, addressing the other two Jedi Masters at the table. "Even if we Jedi were to do nothing, a coup attempt might occur anyways. We have the opportunity to guide events to the best possible outcome; I suggest we do not waste it."

"This is insane," Valin protested. "We as Jedi are taking sides in an internal power struggle of a distant government all in the name of helping others?"
"No," Corran said unexpectedly, sharing a long look with Master Krahnn. "They're right. The rest of the Order may not accept this, or see things as we do, but Natua and Matarmeno are right. We, as the Jedi of the Corellian Praxeum, have been looking for something that defines us, this could be it. Doing what was necessary and right instead of standing on the sidelines and watching events pass us by."
Corran's decision seemed to be a deciding factor, as the other Jedi reluctantly nodded in agreement. After a visual vote, Corran address both the Hapans and Corellians present. "You have the blessings of this praxeum to continue your current course. Tell us where you need us most and we will do our best to assist you."
"Excellent," Prime Minister Saxan smiled in relief. "There, Duchas, did I not say your fears would be unfounded? Corellia's Jedi are a breed above the rest."
"Indeed. We look forward to working with you, Jedi. We'll prove ourselves worthy of your help. Heritage Council, out."
The two Ducha faded from view, and the room returned to its naturally lit state.
"So then," Gavele began uncertainly. "We have your full support?"
"Yes," Corran agreed with a professional nod. "If you will give us a week or so to wrap up our current missions we'll then put our full effort in resolving this matter."
"Then it's settled then," Prime Minister Saxan concluded. "In the interest of aiding as many people as quickly as possible, the Jedi of the Corellian Praxeum will assist Corellia and her Hapan allies in overthrowing the current Queen Mother."
"I believe you Jedi have a saying," Defense Minister Willems commented. "'May the Force be with us all.'"
{-[IV]-} {-[IV]-}
"Dad?" Jysella asked, she, her father, and her brother passing through the doors of her great-grandfather's estate. "Are we really doing this?"
Corran held up a hand, activating the estate's anti-surveillance network as the heavy wooden doors closed behind them. Releasing a breath, Corran made a sound of assent. "Yes."
"But Tenel Ka…"
"Jysella, you and Valin helped get the current Prime Minister elected, against my own judgment I might add," Corran said. They took their places around a dining table.

"Of the candidates for Prime Minister, she was the best option," Valin said defensively.
"Of the candidates for Prime Minister, she's still a politician, and a seasoned one at that," Corran corrected. "Both she and this Heritage Council of Hapes are taking a dangerous gamble, and she should know that. If it backfires, she could end up uniting the rest of the Galactic Alliance against the 'Corellian Aggressors' and breathe new life into Cal Omas' stint as Chief of State. Corellia has Adumar, Fondor, and countless other systems on *their* side. The Hapan Consortium has only just begun establishing firm ties with outside systems. Given how insular they are, I'm surprised at how successful their alliance with the Bothans has been. In any case, unless done right, this little coup the Heritage Council is planning might blow up into a full-scale galactic civil war."
"So why back Natua and Master Krahnn?" Valin frowned, alarm growing on his face.
"Because the coup is going to happen no matter what the Jedi say," Corran said sternly. "Both Jedi Knight Wan and Master Krahnn picked up on that in the meeting. Saxan and her Hapan allies are already in position to strike, going to us was just a formality."
Jysella felt the pieces click into place, her mind overclocking as she sought to condense all of the information of the past few days. "It's better to remain in the loop than outside of it. If the Jedi are in a position to keep the conflict small by being a part of the conflict, we can steer events to avoid the bigger civil war this might trigger."
"Exactly," Corran said. "As unfortunate as it is, this situation will no doubt put us on opposite sides of the Jedi Council and our friends. But, apart from averting a civil war among the Galactic Alliance's allies, I sense something else at play."
"Something else?" Jysella blinked.
"Aidel Saxan, as skilled as she is, has been manipulated into this war without her realizing it. A war being driven by elements within the Hapan government. You heard the briefing, this Heritage Council tried to reach out to her predecessor four years ago, but he didn't accept their offer. A new leader, a new offer, and we have the situation we have now. Hapes is famous for their attempted coups, but they're also famous for keeping those coups in-house. They might hire one or two outside assassins, but they've never gotten a foreign government involved. Something in the Force is telling me that we're missing something, and only by participating in the events as they unfold will we discover what that is."

The sound of someone clapping above their heads startled all three Horns.
"Oooo, rebelling against the establishment. That sounds fun! Can I join?"
All three Horns immediately jerked in alarm, hands flying to their lightsabers as they turned their gaze to the rafters of the old estate. A single shadow was just barely visible in the twilight coming in from the nearby window.
The shadow was definitely female, and also definitely Twi'lek. The figure rolled off the side of the support beam and landed with a graceful flourish. The figure, despite showing obvious signs of dark-side corruption, wore a familiar black leather outfit and matching thigh-high boots.
Sunken yellow eyes gleamed as she delighted in their shocked expressions. "Tada, miss me?"
"Alema!" Jysella gasped.
"Alema!?" Valin blinked.
"Alema?" Corran was nonplussed.
"Yup, yup, and 'Hi, Master'."
"What are you doing here?" Jysella managed.
"What happened to your face?" Valin said, his brain still non-functional.
"Where have you been?" Corran said, faring no better than his children.
"Here to help, my job has really poor health benefits, and I've been around," Alema ticked off each question with a grin that stretched the lightning-scarred half of her face. The rest of her face was worse than gaunt, very skeletal in appearance, as if her skin was stretched over the very bones of her skull.
"You *are* a wanted criminal, you know that, right?" Jysella said, her shock giving way into disbelief and anger. "What in blazes are you…?"
"Hold that thought," Alema winked. A serious mask fell over her face as she bypassed Jysella and Valin. "Master Horn—you are a real Master now, right—anyways the people I currently work for are getting really concerned about the state of things. They don't like losing control of situations, so given my past ties to the Jedi Order, they felt that I would be better serving the cause if I went back. You Jedi are supposed to be high on forgiveness after all. I mean, Durron blew up a solar system but for a couple of years he was part of the galaxy's decision-making body. I would have gone to Anakin first, but he's kind of unavailable. I figured as my former Master, you'd at least give me some leeway."
"The people you work for?" Corran said suspiciously. "Alema, you bear all the signs of someone corrupted by the dark side."

"Uh huh," Alema glanced at one of her dark blue arms, the veins prominent. She then tilted her head back at Corran. "Yup. And?"
"Alema."
"Look, from what I hear, the Jedi are shorthanded as it is. You're going to need all the help you can get. Besides, given what you're planning, isn't it better for me to return and join you Corellians? It'll cement the 'we've gone rogue' angle you're looking for, and it allows me to stay out of prison, which is definitely a plus."
"You're going to have to do better than that, Alema," Corran said sternly, the shock of her appearance wearing off.
"I can always do my disappearing act and investigate whoever is behind this war by myself," Alema shrugged apathetically. "I'm only coming to you guys because I thought it'd be fun playing 'Jedi' for a little bit."
"'Playing Jedi?'" Corran repeated blankly.
"You said it yourself, Master Horn, I hardly look the image for goodness and all things Jedi," Alema did a little pirouette with her bony arms out above her head. "Come on, for old time's sake?"
"She is right," Valin said reluctantly. "I doubt Master Skywalker and the rest of the Jedi would fully believe that *the* Corran Horn has suddenly decided to go against the status quo. You were one of the first of this new Order, have a background in intelligence, even played the bad guys before when you were searching for mom. If the other Jedi don't believe it, then we're going to run out of room to maneuver real fast. She can give us that room."
"Always knew you were my favorite Horn. After Sella, and your mom, and your dad that is."
"Gee, thanks," Valin shot back.
"Anytime. So, Master. What will it be? Shall I slink away and you three forget you ever saw me?"
"No," Corran said automatically. He then took a moment to organize his thoughts. "No, you can stay."
"Goody!"
"But we do everything by the book," Corran said sternly.
"There's a book that tells you how to pretend to be renegade Jedi and launch a war where the other side is full of your friends?" Alema blinked owlishly. "I definitely have to read that one."
"You know what I mean."
"I'll be on my best behavior." Alema's face transformed into a wolfish grin. She spun around and whistled as she took in the rest of the estate. "Big place for Jedi. Do you really need eight bedrooms?"

"Just…" Corran rubbed at his face. "Just let me know before you blow something up or kill someone, or cause some sort of political disturbance or general mayhem."
Alema winked over her shoulder. "Hey, it's me."
"That's what I was afraid of," Corran sighed, his source of anguish now sauntering down the hallway, admiring the paints and other works of art along the way. "Do you have a place to stay at least? A *legal* place to stay?"
"Already unloaded all my gear in the guest room." The Twi'lek ran her hand along a wooden table, and then over a hanging tapestry, whistling a merry tune as she did. "Really nice house you guys have here. What're we having for eating?"
Valin cleared his throat. "That's up to Jysella's boyfriend."
"*Friend*," Jysella emphasized, shooting her brother a lethal glare. "He's just a friend."
"Again?"
"Val," Jysella growled warningly.
"Ooooo, you have a boyfriend!" Alema said eagerly, abandoning her perusal of the hallway and shooting an eager grin at the youngest Horn. "Is he a good…"
"He's a very good friend," Jysella turned her glare onto the Twi'lek, even as her cheeks reddened.
"Can't wait to meet him. It's been ages since I could just sit around a table and have a meal," Alema said perkily.
"Ages?" Jysella frowned in confusion.
"Last sit-down meal I had was before that mission to the Remnant on Mon Cal, with you guys."
"That was almost nine years ago!"
Alema's expression faltered for fractions of a second. It wasn't long, but the three sharp-eyed Horns picked up on it instantly.
"Alema?" Corran said, his voice gentle.
"It's nothing," Alema forced out an unconvincing smile, even as she hugged herself with one arm. "Can't believe it's been that long though. Now it makes me want to eat a meal with you guys even sooner. He going to be long?"
Jysella glanced at the nearest clock. "Tarc should be off-loading his last customers now, so in another half-hour or so."
"Well, if I've gone nine years without a home-cooked meal, I guess I can wait another half-hour."
"In the meantime, why don't you tell us where you've been?" Corran half-suggested. "You had a lot of people worried for you."

"Please, apart from you guys and Anakin and Tahiri, the rest of the galaxy couldn't give a bantha's hindquarters about me," Alema rolled her eyes. She softened the gesture with a faint smile and nodded once. "But I've definitely got some fun stories to share. Provided you guys tell me all about Sella's boyfriend. Sharing has to go both ways after all."
"Friend! And no deal!"
"Deal!" Valin said simultaneously.
Corran just held his head. "On a second thought, maybe we should eat first. Go on and finish settling in, Alema. I've got some unofficial calls to make."
"You used to be so much fun," Alema pouted at first, but then she shrugged, looking strangely guarded. "Let me know when Sella's *friend* arrives. I'll be in the guest room."
{-[V]-} {-[V]-}
Dinner had been an awkward success, with everyone somehow pulling through without loss of life or limb. Tarc had arrived with both Mirax and Booster in tow, grinning sheepishly at the shocked expressions of the Horn family and explaining that the two had 'hijacked' his shuttle to take them to the family dinner.
Strangely enough, none of the three new arrivals even gave Alema a second look, acknowledging the wanted fugitive with warm, but curious smiles and welcoming her to the house.
Alema had been thoroughly surprised at how closely Tarc resembled Anakin, and that had launched a rather fun-filled story of those adventurous times during the Yuuzhan Vong War. Much of the dinner was spent with the Horns doing their best to fill in the blanks for Alema in the time after she had left Imperial Space.
They told her of Mandalore—Alema jerking in alarm when she heard that Jysella had been impaled by amphistaffs—and of the reconstruction after. Of the battles for Corellia and how Jysella and Tarc ended up meeting. They spoke of the time they had spent tracking down the Yuuzhan Vong biological weapons' labs, the battle over Mon Calamari, on Coruscant. Of Ganner's passing, of Anakin and Tahiri's exile. Of all the events that had happened in the years following the war.
And Alema would just listen, offering a few sly comments here and there, but staying mostly silent. As the Horn family, plus Tarc, laughed and shared jokes over a noodle-dish painstakingly prepared by Tarc, the Twi'lek just looked on with an almost bittersweet smile.
It might have been something she had done with the Force, but the meal ended without her sharing a single shred of information. The

table was cleaned, Tarc was bid a fond farewell, Booster likewise left with a huff, and the occupants of the Horn Estate retreated to their separate rooms. It all seemed so normal, as if Alema was just another friend sleeping over, and that the galaxy had nothing insidious planned for them all.

Which was probably why Jysella was unable to fall asleep. Her mind was still working overtime to process the rapid turn of events that had played out over the course of the week. How it went from routine and boring to entangled in political intrigue and treachery, she still didn't know. And that was without Alema's unexpected return.

The young woman stretched her senses out towards the guest room, and then jolted upright when she couldn't sense Alema anywhere inside. Had the enigmatic Twi'lek disappeared again? Jysella knew that Alema was hiding something, it was as plain as the scars all along the Twi'lek's face and arm.

Silently sliding out of bed, Jysella pulled a loose jacket over her and slipped out of her room. She was half-way through the house, passing through her dancing room, when she saw her mother looking out one of the towering windows.

"Mom?"

"Going to check on our guest?"

"Yeah, how'd you…"

"Don't need the Force to read minds," Mirax said with a gentle smile, tapping lightly on the windowpane. In the distance, in the faint moonlight, Jysella could make out a single figure hunched over the crystal clear lake. "I think she just needed some space."

"Do you…trust her?" Jysella said hesitantly.

Mirax was silent for a very long moment. "Your father asked the same thing. So, I'll tell you what I told him. I wouldn't say I trust Alema, but at the same time, we all have our secrets, our skeletons. Some have more than most. Trust, that will take some time, but she has to be given that chance first. In the short time that I knew her, I could tell that she was desperately looking for a family, a place to belong. Now, it's been seven, eight years since I last saw her, but at dinner tonight, she seemed like the same Alema that she once was. She's still looking for a place, trying to prove something to herself, but wholly lost at the same time."

"Lost?"

"I think, what she needs most, is a sister, a friend," Mirax said softly. "Someone to tell her that whatever she's been doing is worth the price she's paid, the scars she's collected. And I don't mean the ones that are obviously visible. Wherever she's been these past years, she

doesn't want to talk about it. Probably because she's scared and has a misplaced desire to protect us at the same time."
"So what do I do?"
"Go out there," Mirax pointed towards the distant lakeside. "Let her know that we Horns aren't going anywhere anytime soon. Let her know that we'll be the family she can have if she wants. I've always wanted another daughter anyways."
"Mom," Jysella objected half-heartedly, her eyes glittering.
"She's still the same Alema at heart," Mirax repeated. "You just might have to dig a little to get there though."
Jysella exhaled, steadying herself. "Okay."
"I'll go back to bed then." Mirax rose from her chair. "I was building up the nerve to talk to her myself, but I think you're the better choice. *You* after all, already trust her."
The younger woman was drawn up short for a moment, realizing with a startled gasp that her mother was right. Her eyes widened and they sought out Mirax's uncertainly. "I…I…"
"Don't worry," Mirax placed a hand on her daughter's arm. "I believe this is where your father would say, trust in your feelings, trust in the Force. If both of them are telling you the same things, you can't be wrong."
"And if they're telling me different things?"
"Then do whatever feels right," Mirax said gently. "You're my daughter, and I know your dad and I raised you well. You'll do the right thing in the end, I know you will."
"Thanks, mom," Jysella reached out and hugged Mirax.
"Anytime, Sella. As old as you and Valin get, you'll always be my children," Mirax planted a kiss on Jysella's head and gave her one last reassuring pat. "Nice to know I still have some uses in *my* old age."
"You're not that old, mom."
"I knew there was a reason I kept you around," Mirax chortled. "I'll see you at breakfast."

{-[VI]-} {-[VI]-}

Jysella hesitantly pushed aside the large fronds of a fern growing alongside the placid lakeside, spotting Alema's dark, hunched-over form with relative ease. Though it was the middle of the night, the light from Corellia's three moons, as well as the many stars in the sky, provided more than enough illumination for her Force-enhanced vision. Yet, despite the relatively peaceful nature of the scene, with the nightlife chittering and chirping in the background, there was a clear sense of wrongness emanating from the kneeling Twi'lek.
"Alema?"

The Twi'lek jumped slightly, as if she hadn't detected Jysella's approach, lightsabers flying into both her hands. "Huh? Oh, Sella, it's just you."
"Are…are you okay?" Jysella asked, mentally cursing herself for asking such a dim-witted question. There was no question that Alema *wasn't* 'okay' on any level. Even her startled greeting had been hoarse, as if the older woman had just finished a good cry.
"Have to be," Alema clipped her lightsabers back to her utility belt and sat back, pulling her legs to her chest. "So much to do. Can't afford to be anything else *but* 'okay.'"
"Alema, this is *me* you're talking to. I didn't believe you were evil back on Kalee, and I sure as Sith don't believe you'd do anything to betray your friends."
"What an ironic use of words," Alema replied dryly. She let out a soft sigh, resting her chin on the tops of her knees. "Still haven't lost that innocence though, that's good."
Jysella sat down on the muddy lakeside next to the older woman, tilting her head slightly to rest it on Alema's shoulder. "I just like believing the best in people. The alternative is not too fun to think about."
"You're telling me."
"Wanna tell me where you've been these last few years? The real reason why you look as you do."
"Like a dark Jedi?"
"Yeah, you're not a bad person," Jysella whispered. "My dad knows that, my brother knows that, so does my mom. And then you show up after your disappearing act looking like you do, you can't honestly say we'd let that pass, can you?"
Alema appeared to mull Jysella's words over for a moment, but then the Twi'lek shook her head sharply. "No. I'm already taking a big risk getting this much involved."
"So you're going to decide for me, whether I want to take some risks too?"
"You have a boyfriend, a family. I have no…"
"You have a family too!" Jysella hissed, pushing off the Twi'lek and standing. "You said it yourself earlier, *we* care about you, about this," she gestured to the scarred, right half of Alema's body. "And whatever else you've gotten us into. If you're worried about our reaction, don't be. Family is there for each other through the best and worst of times, at least this family is."
Alema just hugged her legs tighter, closing her eyes.

In the moonlight, Jysella could see the tears escape from the Twi'lek's eyes, and she slumped. "Please, Alema, let us help. You don't have to do everything by yourself."
"That's the point! I have to!" Alema shouted up almost desperately. "I have to because I'm the only one who can! As wise as your father is, he doesn't have the answers. As powerful as Anakin was, he was just a little kid pretending to be big and running away when things became too much for him. The Skywalkers? The Durrons and Solusars of this galaxy? Please, don't make me laugh. You Jedi are so insulated in your little bubbles that you can't even see the shadows you're projecting until it's too late! Me, I walk in those shadows. My hands are covered in blood, my whole body is. You say I'm not a bad person, and you couldn't be more wrong." Alema let out a maddened laugh, yellow eyes gleaming in the darkness. The air seemed to drop several degrees, the water at Alema's feet frosting over. "So, so, so wrong, Sella. I've killed, murdered, turned friends against one and other, destroyed minds, caused perfectly legitimate and fair governments to collapse and let anarchy take their place. There was this one time, I teamed up with…a business partner. We were going after this intelligence analyst in the Outer Rim. He wasn't home, but his family was. His family, and the families of his house-staff as well. He had a lovely wife and five kids. There were probably a dozen kids in all in that house that night…"
Alema sprang to her feet and began to pace. "When my business partner and I were done, the sun was just starting to rise and there was not a soul left alive in that house. A little red-haired girl, couldn't have been more than ten, was begging me not to kill her. You see, she was the last one, had seen what my business partner and I did to the others…but I had to….I had to." Alema trailed off, staring into the lake. The calm surface was marred by the droplets of fast falling tears. "And the worst part is, that's probably the least of my crimes. I can't even recognize my own reflection any more. I tell myself that what I'm doing is for good, that I'm doing this for my friends, for peace…Has it really been nine years? Every day seems the same for me now. Every night full of torments that I'll never be free from."
"Alema," Jysella whimpered, still seated and staring up at the older woman in distress.
Yellow eyes spun back to focus on Jysella. "That's why I can't tell you or *your* family anything. Can't pollute them. One insane pretend Jedi is enough. Let my crimes be my own."
At that, Jysella stood, and in several big strides, wrapped her arms around Alema in a tight hug. Alema stiffened at the contact, but was unable to stop a fresh wave of tears from rolling down her cheeks.

After several long seconds, Jysella stepped back. "When was the last time you danced?"
"Danced?" Alema frowned. "What has that got to…?"
"I find I always feel better after dancing," Jysella said tenderly. "In sync with wherever I am at the moment, with the living creatures all around me and the Force."
Alema shook her head slowly. "Sella, dancing won't…"
"Remember what you taught me all those years ago?" Jysella continued, as if Alema hadn't said anything. She began rocking the two of them back and forth "You have to find your own rhythm, something that defines who you are. Dancing, fighting, they're pretty much the same thing, all your moves depend on is who you are fighting for, dancing for. Come on, close your eyes, Alema. Pretty please?"
With a defeated sound, Alema did as she was told.
Now, who do you want to dance for? Jysella's thoughts echoed in the Twi'lek's mind. *Where do you picture yourself?*
Despite herself, a fleeting smile passed across Alema's lips. "I'm on a stage, the sun is high and the seats are packed."
Go on.
"Everyone I know is in the audience. You, Numa, Anakin, Tahiri, Ganner…everyone."
We're all connected through the Force, reach out to this planet. Feel the Force flow through you.
Alema released a breath, the cool night air filling her lungs as she breathed in again. Her first extensions of her senses were tentative, as if afraid of hurt. But after finding only the wildlife and trees around her, Alema's mind reached out and began to submerge itself in the Force.
Why are you dancing, Alema?
"I'm happy," Alema whispered, her body began to sway. "Happy. Everyone has their families, has peace. I just want to make them smile even more."
And suddenly, instead of the lakeside, they were on a giant stone stage together, in front of a massive crowd full of their friends and family. Alema looked around wide-eyed, her gaze searching familiar faces almost in disbelief. It was then she realized that both she and Jysella were wearing clothing similar to the dancing outfits they had worn on Tatooine all those years ago.
Turning to a smirking Jysella, Alema's mouth opened and closed soundlessly. Before she could ask a question, however, music began to play.
"Come on, Lema," Jysella gestured. "We have an audience to make smile."

"Sella?" Alema said weakly.
"Mind if I join?" The voice of Numa Rar nearly caused Alema to fall to the ground.
"Sure, the more the merrier," Jysella smiled. The blue-skinned Twi'lek immediately began to sway to a hypnotic drum beat, winking at Alema and gesturing for the other woman to join in.
The music picked up.
"How?" Alema whispered.
"Shhhh," Jysella said, twining her arms in intricate circles to an up-beat flute solo. "Just focus on who you're dancing for, the lives you're trying to make better, and dance. Focus on the Force, on how it binds everyone together. We're all a part of it. Your happiness is theirs, and theirs are yours. Share your burdens, just like you are helping them share theirs."
Alema, shaking her head in wonder, finally managed a genuine, full-fledged grin and nodded; a saxophone-like instrument joining in The crowd roared in approval as Alema gave herself to the music, her feet working in intricate patterns that she had learned as a little girl, her body twisting this way and that.
And as she danced, Alema finally began to laugh. The scars on her arm and face began to disappear, her dark-blue skin returning to its natural tint. Her movements became more carefree, joining in with Jysella and Numa's almost effortlessly. She danced on, her eyes sweeping the audience again and again, reminding herself of who she was dancing for and why.
Sometime later, with a joyful and breathless chuckle, Numa, Jysella, and Alema all collapsed together in a pile of tangled limbs. Their audience faded away, leaving only the three of them in the glow of a setting sun.
"Thank you, Jysella," Alema whispered softly.
"What about me?" Numa pouted.
"Aren't you just a figment of my mind?" Alema asked playfully.
"Figment my blue ass."
Alema turned suspiciously to the human member of their trio. Jysella just smiled mischievously. "Told you 'we're all part of the Force'."
Almost just as quickly, Alema's head snapped around to her sister in fearful awe. "Numa?"
"Alema," Numa confirmed with a sad smile.
"I…I…"
"Shhhh…" Numa said gently, squeezing one of Alema's hands gently and using the other to place a finger over her lips. "Just thought I'd

drop by. Been a while since we've danced and I kind of missed it. Better not make me wait too long for the next one."
Alema let out a strangled sound and nodded, pulling on both her arms so she could hug Jysella and Numa at the same time. "I'm sorry…so sorry…"
Alema wasn't sure how long they stayed that way, or how many times she had apologized. Before she realized it, the stage had faded away and she was once again on the lakeside. The Corellian sun was rising once more, its light refracting off the shimmering clear water and setting the peaks of the mountains aglow. Her right arm was once again scarred, and a brief check of her face revealed that it too still bore the evidence of her lightning-inflicted injury she had obtain those long years ago.
Looking around almost manically, she relaxed only when she spotted Jysella. The younger Jedi was fast asleep, curled up in a ball with a slight smile on her face.
Alema's own expression softened. She shrugged off her black jacket and draped it over Jysella's sleeping form. "Thanks for the dance, Sella."
Alema closed her eyes to center herself. She still wasn't ready to tell Jysella or the others what she had done in her time away, but that guilt didn't eat at her as badly as before. Alema straightened and looked back towards the Horn Estate.
First things first. She had a war-in-the-making-by-unknown-forces to deal with. Everything else she could worry about later.
{-[VII]-} {-[VII]-}
"Do you know why we were called?" Alema asked, walking in stride with the Horns and other leaders of the Corellian Praxeum through the corridors of the capitol building.
"No," Valin said with a shake of his head. "But there was a Senate meeting earlier today, and reports say that the Hapan Queen Mother lodged an official protest. I'm not sure what Omas could do, but an investigation of any sort will force Saxan and the others to speed up their plans."
"We should have expected it though," Jysella pointed out. "I mean, Tenel Ka's been complaining to us about Aidel and the others for the past two weeks and we haven't been able to really give her a satisfactory answer. Short of revealing our hand we couldn't have done much."
"So this is it then," Alema's eyes glittered with excitement. "Ready to become rogues in the eyes of everyone else?"

Valin's smile was far from enthusiastic. "Not really. Don't you feel guilty about removing Tenel Ka from power? You were closer to her than me or Sella."
"Not really," Alema shrugged. "She knew the risks when she took up the throne. Besides, it's what will happen after that I'm more interested in."
"After?"
"Well, you take Tenel Ka off her throne and she no longer has to play that nice politician that comes with the crown she wears. Can you imagine the havoc she'll cause in her quest to retake the throne? Delicious!"
"You have some serious issues," Valin said bluntly.
"Yup," Alema laughed. "Come on, don't tell me that you're perfectly content fighting the same old pirate groups day in and out. A little war always spices things up."
"Alema, we're the ones removing her from the throne," Jysella voiced, her words tinged with amusement. "That kind of makes us between her and getting that throne back."
Alema paused. "Oh, right. Forgot about that."
"It will prove to be interesting to say the least," Natua said mildly. "And with your presence, Rar, it is now more likely that the Order *will* intervene should Tenel Ka begin to lose. She *is* the mother of Jacen Solo's child after all, not to mention the daughter of a Dathomiri Praxeum leader."
They fell silent as the doors to the council room opened. Unlike previously, instead of ministers, the room was full of military personnel. Even retired General Wedge Antilles and his wife Iella were present. The two exchanged silent nods with the Horns as Prime Minister Saxan stepped forward and the Jedi took their seats.
"By now you have heard the news from Denon?"
"We have," Corran replied professionally.
"Then you will also have foreseen the next logical step."
"An escalation," Master Corask Slen'da answered. "To assist your allies in gaining control of Hapes before a Galactic Alliance investigation can ferret out the plan ahead of time."
"Yes," Admiral Genna Delpin confirmed. "Ducha AlGray and Galney have already opened their space up to our ships, and we are moving men and supplies as we speak. Our Hapan confederates are also moving into position."
"How do you intend to minimize the loss of life?" Master Krahnn asked in his customary soft voice. "A military engagement will undoubtedly provoke violence."

"We intend for the military engagement to be a distraction," Admiral Delpin answered. "While the Royalists are worried about our ships, commando units and Hapan Loyalists will be infiltrating the Hapan capital and palace. When the time is right, they'll take off the head of the beast, and the Heritage Council will quickly step into the power vacuum to restore order."
"Just like that?" Alema spoke up, somehow silencing the room with her question.
"Do you see a flaw in our plan?"
"One big enough to drive an Imp Star Deuce through," Alema said sardonically. "Are you forgetting that the Queen Mother is a Jedi? That her bodyguards are skilled fighters, any one worth a dozen mercenaries our Hapan *allies* can muster. But if you planned on getting your people and the loyalist slaughtered, then there's no trouble at all."
"And you would be Jedi…"
"Just Alema, no title," the Twi'lek tilted her head towards a Corellian Intelligence analyst, and then looked back to the Prime Minister. "If I may, I have an alternate plan."
"Go ahead."
"Tenel Ka is a Jedi and a ruler of her people. She'll do what's best for them. Space the intrigue and political fodder. Have the Heritage Council declare their intentions, and then have Corellia and all her allies recognize them as the official representative of Hapes. Afterwards, use all the resources at their disposal to wreak havoc in the Consortium. Have Hapans fire on Hapans, Consortium planets razing each other. Fill the local HoloNets with scenes of death, of rioting, of hunger, and despair. When Tenel Ka realizes that staying in power is causing all this distress, she'll step down. It's slower than your plan, but once the ball gets rolling, there's no stopping it."
"And I thought we were trying to avert a bloody coup," Corran said dryly.
"Like I said, if you'd rather the blood spilt be Corellian, go ahead and stick with their plan," Alema shrugged. "I'm just offering an alternative. There's no doubting the bad blood in the Consortium, the only question is whether you want to let it fester or get it all out all at once. My way, the Queen Mother gets to live and step down according to Hapan tradition. The Corellian and Loyalists wanted to assassinate her. What's more important, the life of a Jedi Queen, or the thousands who will die in the fighting?"

"A Jedi is always prepared to sacrifice themselves if it is the will of the Force," Master Krahnn said, eyebrows raising at Alema's obvious un-Jedi view of the situation.
"Oh good, go get Tenel Ka's permission to kill her for the good of the Force then. She dies, a whole bunch of Hapans get to live, and the Heritage Council can take over. She lives, a whole bunch of Hapans die, and the Heritage Council takes over." Alema leaned back in her chair and rested her booted feet on the table. "Pretty much the same end-result. I guess the question is, Master. Just how many lives is the life of one Jedi worth? A Jedi is just one person in the end. Does being a Jedi make them more deserving of life than say, the Prime Minister there? My way, you spare a friend by sacrificing complete strangers. Their way is to sacrifice your friend to preserve the lives of complete strangers. Anyway, that's just food for thought. Enjoy your meeting."
"Wait, you're going?" Jysella blinked.
"I'm not exactly the type of person to plan my evil deeds around a table. I'd rather just get right to it. Prime Minister, you won't mind if I catch a ride on one of your troop transports do you? Hapes seems like an excellent place to tour this time of year."
"What?" Corran finally managed, his mind once again catching up to him.
"Well, if the Corellian's are going to stick to their plan, they need someone capable of taking down a Jedi," Alema gestured to herself. "Regicide seems like a fun thing to add to my list of crimes anyways. I've taken out a governor before, but never a queen."
"Your help will be most welcome," Aidel Saxan said almost hesitantly. "I must confess, however, I am at a loss. I thought the Jedi…"
"Wouldn't do such a thing?" Alema finished. "You're right. But the Jedi of the Corellian Praxeum are far from the mindless pawns that fill the other locations. If we pledge to help, we're not going to just sit on the sidelines, right Masters?"
The three masters, who had mentally conferred with one and other the moment Corran had picked up on Alema's plan, gave assenting nods. It was Natua, however, who spoke. "Since you came to us with the proposal, we've been reviewing our praxeum's charter and goal. We've decided to be Jedi not of the ancient past, but of the now. Not of meditation, but of action. A Jedi can end a war with minimal bloodshed, averting the very conditions Alema just listed. If we were to be part of the commando unit sent to Hapes, we can ensure in person that the coup goes as quick and as bloodless as possible. Jedi Knight Valin Horn has worked with your fleets before and can use his Jedi abilities to make them more efficient against the Hapan cruisers. His sister is an

accomplished user of Mind Tricks and will likewise be a great asset to the commando units. We are ready to do our part, Madame Minister. Just tell us where you need us."
"Knew the praxeum was full of bright ones," Alema remarked, winking at the stoic Natua.
"Do the Jedi Masters agree with this view?" Aidel asked, seemingly just as taken aback as the military personnel in the room.
"We do," Corran said coolly. "We're the ones who agreed to this coup, so it is only right we take part in it as well."
"Even if it alienates you against your fellow Jedi? Against the Galactic Alliance?"
"We'll handle it when the time comes," Master Slen'da said.
Aidel's eyes darted almost greedily to the assembled Jedi. She then clasped her hands together and smiled. "Very well. We'll have your assignments shortly. In the meantime, those of you wanting to go to the Consortium can catch a ride with the nearest transport. With luck, this coup will be fast and effortless, and Corellia can soon use Hapan resources to care for the billions more in need."
"To war," Alema raised an imaginary glass.
Aidel inclined her head stiffly. "To war."
{-[Chapter End]-}

Anakin
{-[I]-} {-[I]-}
Fluttering like the wings of the iridescent birds in the sky, several brightly colored flower petals danced about in the gentle breeze. A gust of wind buffeted them, and they swirled about as the flock of birds zipped downwards and through a vast field of luminescent flowers basking in the sunlight—snapping up hand-sized insects for a mid-day meal. As the birds took to the sky once more, a village could be seen in the distance. Orange and purple coral houses were scattered across a sprawling hillside covered in knee-high grass. In the small valley, fields of crops were being tended to by the village's inhabitants. Sounds of a hard day's labor, but also merriment, filtered upwards as the villagers enjoyed their relatively new, idyllic lifestyle.
The birds flew on, soaring over the towering tampasi with ease. Letting the wind and thermal currents direct their path, the flock swooped across the vast tracts of bora trees below. The system's twin suns shone brightly in the sky as all sorts of wildlife chirped and growled, hollered and chittered. The diverse array of life in the tampasi had only grown more varied since the ending of the Yuuzhan Vong war nearly

seven years prior, when the Yuuzhan Vong plants and animals were merged into the ecosystem of the planet.

Banking once more, the birds soared over another coral-house village at the edge of the forest. This village specialized in animal husbandry, but also tended to the nearby boras. Yuuzhan Vong who had once been warriors were now hunters and bora-tenders, gathering enough food to both sustain the village and trade for other goods. Former shapers now studied the diverse life within the forest, tracked how creatures that had been brought to the planet adapted to their new lives. These villagers were intimately familiar with the tampasi, living symbiotically with all of the living creatures within.

In the far distance, nestled at the foot of a snow-topped mountain range, a much larger settlement could be seen. Unlike the smaller villages, this was a sprawling settlement that straddled a wide river that carried fresh water down from the mountains. More the size of a small city, the population relied heavily on the produce created by the smaller villages in its surrounding area. The coral houses in this settlement were multi-story, with a much larger structure growing slightly off-center to the central market place. Though the Yuuzhan Vong still were not using currency, the market place was a place where goods, labor, and ideas were exchanged.

Schools existed to teach others Shaping skills, combat skills, farming and hunting, and how to run the fledgling bureaucracy of the True Yuuzhan Vong. Knowledge, which had once been so highly guarded and restricted to Domain and caste, was now distributed freely. And with this new open-mindedness was the gradual appearance of metal technologies. Small items at first, a datapad here and there, maybe even a speeder-bike or two. The technology was almost always confined to the city areas, however, with more traditional cultural beliefs still prevalent in the outlying communities. Yet the difference of a free-information society, and the impact it had on the once war-like society was evident in the many new innovative biots that helped to make the city and villages run easier, and the population of the Yuuzhan Vong swell.

In the seven years, the number of large cities had grown from one to five, with an innumerable number of farming and hunting communities spread out throughout the planet. Without war to cull the numbers, advancements made in medical care, and with an abundance of food, shelter, and land, the population boom was quickly replacing the millions of lives lost during the war and then some.

The priests, of course, were not forgotten. Though all Yuuzhan Vong acknowledged the Yun'o, each of the new cities had a patron deity to

whom the faithful primarily worshiped. The priests helped to keep the peace and create a sense of community among the new villages and cities that had sprouted up at the end of the war.
The Yuuzhan Vong were hardly the only ones on the planet either. The inhabitants who were on the planet before the Yuuzhan Vong, the Ferroans, continue to live in their communities on a separate continent. Occasional air-ships would ferry a curious visitor from one side or another, but for the most part, the Yuuzhan Vong left them alone and the Ferroans were content to be alone. Zonama was big enough for both groups to live together in peace. And the peace was possible mostly thanks to the efforts of the Yuuzhan Vong who made up the group of fourteen individuals that was the Supreme Council. All fourteen individuals won their posts through elections, two from each of the cities, and four representing the farming communities. They held their posts for two years and were ineligible for re-election for the following year. The Domains of the elected official also had to wait two election cycles before submitting another one of their people as a possible candidate. A fifteenth individual, the Supreme Leader, was elected by the council and stayed in office until either he or she wanted to step down, or until a simple majority in the council decided to elect a new leader. The quasi-oligarchy cut back on the bureaucratic complications that might have arisen from an inflated government, but also ensured that power was never in the hands of the same Domain or individual for too long. It was a safeguard the earlier incarnation of the Supreme Council had come up with to prevent any one individual or Domain from seizing power.
Despite their attempts, however, they could not solve all their people's problems. Not every Yuuzhan Vong was adjusting well to the sedentary, peaceful, life style.
"The intendants of the city of Yun-Harla reports another riot," Caretaker Ne'rai Rin said efficiently, reading through the latest reports. No longer a caste, intendants had become a standard term for the local government officials who helped to run the everyday happenings of the cities and villages. "The security forces there believe that elements of the Shimrraist faction poisoned the grain supply being disturbed by the market so that the local government would be blamed."
"Well, they were definitely successful," Drathul Jamaane snorted. He had once been a High Prefect under Shimrra's regime, but defected to the Freed Yuuzhan Vong movement very late in the war. It was because of his very late change of heart that it had taken a long while for the city of Yun-Harla, the second city founded, to vote him back into

a position of power. Even then, Ne'rai, Yun-Harla's other representative, had been elected to balance out his more extreme, old-guard stances.
"This is what, the fifth riot in the past month? What are the local intendants doings about it?" One of the others asked with a frown.
"Yun-Harla's Emissary does not want to give permission for his warriors to use lethal force," Ne'rai replied. "He does not want to give the rioters another reason to escalate their actions."
"We have to be careful that this rioting doesn't spread to the other four cities. Unless we come down hard on the Yun-Harla troublemakers, we might as well sanction their actions."
"Supreme Leader, what do the *Jeedai* have to say about this?" A fifth Caretaker said.
Supreme Leader Taan shook her head. "We won't keep running to the Jedi for every little dispute and problem that arises. They've already done enough these past years to get us to where we are. I say we let them enjoy a brief reprieve from all our troubles."
"Well said, Supreme Leader," the Caretaker from the city of Yun-Ne'shel spoke. "But what do you recommend? In Shimrra's time, riots like this would never have happened. The Shimrraists already see us as weak, as servants to the *Jeedai*. I may not like it, but Caretaker Rahk is correct. This is the fifth time, a heavy hand is needed."
"No Yuuzhan Vong blood will be spilt," Taan stressed, her face aged from the strain of trying to lead her people into a new era.
"With respect, Supreme Leader," Drathul said wryly. "Five intendants have already been killed, and the order-keepers are reporting twenty of their ranks injured. Blood has already been spilt."
"Responding in kind is *not* what we are about," Taan said curtly. "We'll have several detachments of Yun-Yuuzhan's order-keepers dispatched to Yun-Harla to quell the riots. At the same time, I want both Yun-Harla's Prefect and Emissary, and the intendants under them, under full review. Something in that city is happening that they aren't telling us. The Shimrraists are loyal to Shimrra's ways, yes, but they would not have gained popular support unless those governing the city were unpopular. Is anyone in disagreement?"
The council remained silent.
Taan pursed her lips but nodded and looked to Yun-Harla's Caretakers. "Then begin compiling a report on the actions of the intendants. You'll have the first squads of order-keepers by second sun-down today."
"It will be done, Supreme Leader," Ne'rai inclined her head.
"As you say," Drathul said patronizingly.

Taan ignored him and changed the subject. "Caretakers of Yun-Txiin, your report?"
And so the day went on in the capital building of Yun-Yuuzhan, tedious and full of politics. Outside of the building the streets were busy with vendors, shapers, and ships coming and going. If one was careful, they would see an occasional human, or Duros, or one of the many other minority inhabitants of Zonama Sekot. There were teams sent by the Galactic Alliance to help the Yuuzhan Vong stabilize themselves, groups of soldiers who had trained with the Freed Ones and then decided to retire amongst the Yuuzhan Vong after the war, curious scientists, curious students, spacers just stopping by on a quick layover, and Jedi. Most of them lived in or on the outskirts of Yun-Yuuzhan, although some were gradually filtering out to the other settlements and smaller villages.
Although, two Jedi in particular had a small coralline estate all to themselves.
Well, themselves, their honor-guards, their staff, their personal healer, and their ship. On the edge of the tampasi, Yuuzhan Vong yorik coral had been grown around a particularly large bora. There were multiple levels that stretched out across the reaching branches, ropes and ladders connecting one platform to the next, essentially making the estate one of the first Yuuzhan Vong tree-houses. The bora itself absorbed most of the waste matter and regulated the temperature within the structure, while the yorik coral twisted and intertwined with the semi-sentient tree's limbs. The surrounding grounds contained smaller, glimmering orange and purple coral structures that housed the members of Domain Rapuung. The material of the houses shimmered in the noon suns, the buildings themselves interconnected by a winding dirt road that stretched around the impressive estate.
Though Jedi were not much for ostentatious displays of wealth, status, or power, it was hard to avoid any and all of those three when the people you lived amongst saw you as some extension of their gods and saviors. Despite their best efforts they were unable to keep some of the more zealous of their followers from Shaping them a palatial tree-house several hours walk away from the settlement of Yun-Yuuzhan.
"I am slain once more! You have bested all of us, mighty *Jeedai*," A Yuuzhan Vong called out in his native tongue. His announcement was quickly followed by a series of little-girl giggles.
Tahiri, standing on one of the upper levels, simply pressed her hand to her face and shook her head. "That's the last time I get Czalpak to babysit. Really, between him and all the other warriors of the Supreme Leader's personal guard, Cassa's going to be a real terror."

"Definitely takes after you," Anakin planted a playful kiss on Tahiri's forehead and pressed a loving hand to her slightly swollen belly. "Let's hope this little one's idea of a good time isn't slaying Czalpak and his entire squad. Nothing wrong with building droids or Shaping buildings."
There was a slight pull in the Force as Anakin and Tahiri's five year old daughter avoided the ladders and happily leaped up from landing to landing. As a daughter to two powerful Force sensitives, born and raised on a Force-sensitive planet, Cassa's innate ability to use the Force was unmatched. She was already very adept at using the Force to enhance the speed of her little legs, and even used it to help her navigate the upper boughs of the Boras. She seemed inexhaustible, daring, and was always eager to see what the next day would bring her.
Added to her already adventurous spirit was an infantile amphistaff wrapped around her wrist. Completely harmless and more like a pet than an actual weapon, Cassa had found it in an amphistaff field, and took it in, caring for it with great pride. Not only did wearing an amphistaff make her more like her mother, but it also drew praises and awe from the full grown warriors who all seemed to concur that she was indeed the child of gods.
And envy from the Yuuzhan Vong children her age who generally had to wait until their tenth year to earn the right to carry an amphistaff.
"Mom! I managed to slay Uncle Czalpak and the Supreme Guard!"
"Really?" Tahiri grinned, picking up the bundle of energy and whirling her around.
"Uh huh," the green-eyed girl, the mirror image of her mother, said enthusiastically. "Czalpak even taught me the instant death move they use on the bad people."
"Did he?" Tahiri glanced over the edge of the landing at the small gathering of warriors below. Czalpak had the graces to wince and bow his head.
"Tomorrow they're taking me to Yun-Shuno so I can learn the basic moves Domain Esh's warriors use."
"Really?"
"Czalpak, you're in trouble," Anakin called down unnecessarily.
"Please use your divine powers, Avatar of Yun-Ne'shel, to keep your mate from killing me and my men!" Czalpak called back up.
"Are you crazy? She's pregnant! If she wants to do something, I'll be more than happy to let her do it."
"You were the one who said it was okay to teach Cassa the ways of the warrior."

Anakin, sensing Tahiri's raised eyebrow, quickly called back down. "I said it was okay to teach her how to defend herself! Not teach her how to kill people in one blow!"
"There's a difference?"
"Right," Anakin looked to his wife. "Not letting Czalpak or the Supreme Leader's Guard babysit ever again."
Tahiri laughed and rubbed her daughter's back as Cassa clung to her lovingly, eyes closed in contentment. With Cassa's great Force sensitivity was a powerful bond to her parents. The young girl thrived in the love Anakin and Tahiri had for each other, and for her. She was like an un-moveable limpet whenever she decided to bask in the emotions generated by their family bond.
"My little brother says 'hi'," she murmured sleepily, shifting her head against her mother's body.
"Tell him we said 'hi' too," Tahiri loving ran a hand through Cassa's curly golden hair. Having brought Cassa to the master bedroom, Tahiri slipped under the covers, still holding her daughter to her with the utmost care. Cassa was precious to her beyond measure, proof of her and Anakin's love for each other.
"Okay mommy."
Tahiri just smiled, rubbing her daughter's back soothingly. Unlike her current pregnancy, Cassa's creation had been an unplanned surprise for both she and Anakin. Though they had both agreed to have children, they had wanted to wait until the Yuuzhan Vong were a bit more stable to have any. Helping the fledgling government and the Yuuzhan Vong settle on Zonama Sekot had been more than a full-time job for the both of them, and there was still much to be done.
The Force, however, seemed to have other plans. During a particularly passionate birthday celebration, both had neglected their usual form of Force-assisted birth control. The next morning, they had awoken to find themselves parents-to-be. It had been a surprise, but not an unwelcome one.
Of course, once the news went out that the Avatar of Yun-Shuno was with child—rumors and stories spread fast on the planet—well-wishes by pretty much everyone fearful of incurring the wrath of Yun-Shuno became a daily occurrence until Cassa was born. Several priests even declared the pregnancy an auspicious sign of good things to come. So, not even born yet and Cassa had already been doing her part to help the Yuuzhan Vong acclimatize to their new home.
Soft footsteps, and then Anakin entered the room.
"You two are amazing," Anakin said softly. He kissed the top of Cassa's head, and then gently smooshed his daughter between himself and his

wife. Surrounded by warmth and love, Cassa sighed contently and drifted off to sleep.
"Never would I have ever imagined being so happy, so at peace," Tahiri murmured, settling against her husband. "I have you, our amazing daughter, this beautiful peace, everything I could ever wish for. I hope it stays like this for a very long time."
"I do too," Anakin murmured, his own eyes closing as he held his family to him. They meant everything to him, were more than worth all the struggles and emotional turmoil he had experienced over the years. "I love you, you know that? The both of you."
"Uh huh," Tahiri whispered, her voice soft as she too began to drift off. "Love you too, Hero Boy. Always will."
Despite the political turmoil and all the hardships that still existed in a galaxy recovering from an intergalactic war, one family at least, had found the peace and security that had been searching for in the arms of each other and the comforting Force embrace of Zonama Sekot.
{-[II]-} {-[II]-}
Even when he had been in the middle of most of it, Anakin Solo couldn't help but be amazed at how much things had changed over the years. Holding on to his daughter's hands and letting her swing their arms back and forth as they walked along the dirt road towards their estate's stables, Anakin could never have seen himself where he was now. He had a family, he had a home, and things were pretty much as normal as he could hope. Heck, he was even walking his daughter out to their ride so he could take her and her friends to school.
"Hi Cassa!" An energetic voice called out in Basic.
"{Cass!}" Another voice in Huttesse added.
"[Daughter of the gods]," a third said in formal Yuzhan Vong.
Cassa spun around, her face brightening as she waved at her school-friends. Anakin chuckled as she responded to each of them in a deluge of information-filled spiels so much like her mother. What was even more impressive was that she did so using the different languages her friends spoke, Basic, Huttesse, and Yuuzhan Vong. He had picked up more than his fair share of Yuuzhan Vong during his time on Zonama Sekot, but Cassa's mastery of the language was a lot greater than his. It was almost as if the Force had enhanced her learning abilities, with other languages becoming almost second nature to her.
"[Jae'na]," Cassa said in exasperation, addressing a young Yuuzhan Vong girl, a daughter of the pilot Falhar and the Caretaker Ne'rai. "[I'm not the daughter of gods! I'm Cassa. Cas-sa! For Yun-Harla's sake can you just call me by my name for once? I call you by yours.]"

"[No.]" The young Yuuzhan Vong girl responded, sticking her tongue out in a very human commentary of Cassa's request. Cassa just giggled and shared a hug with her alien friend, turning to the others. "And Ganner, you guys are late again. Daddy and I were about to leave without you three."
The human boy, the son of two of the surviving commandos who had assaulted the World Brain during the war, held up his hands. "It's not my fault this time! Blame Utrila! She's the one that wanted to cut across the amphistaff field in hopes of finding a baby one like yours!" He gestured to the Huttesse-speaking, six year-old Twi'lek that rounded off Cassa's trio of friends.
The red-skinned Twi'lek, a daughter of a Hutt-owned slave who had been on Ylesia, made a sound of displeasure. She was unique among most of Zonama Sekot's population in that she was also Force sensitive, and had benefited from being born on Zonama Sekot much like Cassa had. Of course, being one of the few Force sensitive children on the planet, she and Cassa had become the best of friends. "{You were just as eager, Ganner. So don't put all the blame on me}."
"{Jedis'sei, Ganner, you guys are always fighting! Stop it, now,}" Cassa glared authoritatively, stomping her foot in emphasis.
Both Ganner Ra'ze and Jedis'sei Utrila looked away from each other petulantly. There was no doubt that Cassa was the leader of their little group.
Anakin chuckled and gestured to their ride. "All ready to go to school now?"
"Yup," Ganner beamed.
"Alright," Anakin made a slight clicking noise with his tongue, and their mode of transport ambled happily out of its enclosure. "Okay, all aboard Little Bantha."
The *rakamat*, divested of any plasma-weaponry, was now little more than a glorified school bus. And Anakin, Jedi Knight and once tapped to be the Jedi Order's next Grandmaster, was little more than a glorified *rakamat* driver.
Yup, the times had definitely changed, Anakin reflected with high spirits.
He watched with pride as both Jedis'sei and Cassa helped their friends up onto the house-sized creature, before they used the Force to leap up onto the back to join them. He followed suit, lightly gripping the reins of the creature as the group of five and six year-olds quickly disappeared into their own world. The trip down the wide road was filled with their energetic chattering and giggles, the sound increasing as he stopped by various homesteads and villages to pick up more

children. Most were Yuuzhan Vong, though a few others were children of the slaves, commandos, and aid-personnel that had settled onto Zonama Sekot. Towards the end of his route, he saw a young Ferroan girl standing on the side of the road, and he waved cheerfully.
"You do know that Tescia's a teenager by now, Sekot?" Anakin said in whisper, leaning over the side of the *rakamat*.
"Shush," Tescia-Sekot hushed him, holding a finger to her lips. "I like being with the children. They have a refreshing view of things."
"Come aboard, we still have room."
"Thank you," Tescia-Sekot beamed, climbing up the rope ladder that dangled off the side of the creature. She was instantly greeted by the others, the happy conversations resuming as Little Bantha continued his journey.
A short while later they reached a brightly colored ovoid structure made of both coral and metal. Several other smaller vehicles were likewise pulling up and dropping off children of various ages.
"[Alright kids, we're here,]" Anakin said, using his limited Yuuzhan Vong.
"[Thank you Avatar of Yun-Ne'shel,]" chimed most of the Yuuzhan Vong children as they piled off.
"[And I guess that's my cue,]" a voice full of laughter said, emerging from the ovoid building. "[Come on, children. Put your bags away and get ready for today's lessons.]"
"Shaeri," Anakin greeted.
Shaeri nodded up to him, her eyes sparkling with mirth. Since the war had ended, she had become one of the first Yuuzhan Vong to actually 'marry' instead of the standard Yuuzhan Vong practice of having 'breeding partners', and she had become a teacher to the younger children. Sadly, her brief exposure to the shaped Omega Blue virus and the subsequent cure had left her barren. Nevertheless, she bravely soldiered on; with every group of children she taught finding a place in her heart. "Anakin. Is Tahiri well?"
"As well as can be. We're expecting our next little one any time now."
"I can't wait."
"Neither can Tahiri," Anakin laughed.
"Invite me and Czalpak over for the birth?"
"Of course. Although your husband's in a bit of trouble."
"What'd he do now?"
"He taught me his Domain's instant death move!" Cassa announced cheerfully, demonstrating with her hands.
Shaeri slapped a hand over her face and shook her head. "That man. Maybe it's a good thing I can't give him any children. They'd be terrors!

You managed to keep Tahiri from beating him over the head with his own amphistaff I hope? I am still just a little fond of him."
"Just barely," Anakin smiled.
"Come on down, Cassa, it's time to join the others," Shaeri gestured to the five year old bundle of energy.
"Take care now," Anakin paused the conversation to give Cassa a goodbye hug. "You too Cass."
"You as well," Shaeri said, draping a motherly arm around Cassa the young girl leaped off of Little Bantha without any injury. "Let's go, Cassa."
"[Okay, Teacher Shaeri,]" Cassa replied in Yuuzhan Vong, obediently disappearing into the schoolhouse.
Anakin gave Shaeri one last wave, and then clicked his tongue again to urge Little Bantha back onto the main road.

{-[III]-} {-[III]-}

In the early years of the Yuuzhan Vong settlement of Zonama Sekot, the Jedi and their advice had been more than needed to keep the peace. Caste and Domain differences, ingrained prejudices, and disgruntled Yuuzhan Vong still loyal to the ideas Shimrra had espoused, had made the first few years turbulent to say the least. Yet somehow the Yuuzhan Vong had banded together and, though they were still in the process of settling in, no longer needed the Jedi on a daily basis.
Once stability had been reached, Tekli had joined both Danni Quee and Nen Yim at the premier research and shaping institute on the planet, the Grotto of Yun-Ne'shel, aptly located in the Yuuzhan Vong city of Yun-Ne'shel. In her surplus of free time, the Chadra Fan Jedi appeared to have perfected her multi-cultural healing techniques over the years, using standard, Force, and Yuuzhan Vong methods to cure a wide range of ailments. The humble healer was on the verge of being considered a goddess in her own right after she nearly single-handedly cured a lethal and very contagious virus outbreak that had occurred in the city. Already some priests were referring to her as Yun-Tekli, the healing goddess who treats all no matter their Domain or caste or race.
Danni Quee, the second of the three head researchers at the Grotto of Yun-Ne'Shel, had been in her element since setting foot on the planet, and had never taken her foot off the accelerator since. Finally she had the time, resources, and peace she wanted to research and hypothesize to her heart's content. The blond scientist had become an even greater expert in Yuuzhan Vong biots as she worked side by side with Nen Yim to bring the planet's knowledge into a new era. Nearly all of the new improvements in biots and hybrid technologies had come

from the shapers and scientists at the Grotto, and the years following the war were quickly gaining their reputation as a Golden Age of sorts. All the other teams sent by the Galactic Alliance to help the Yuuzhan Vong acclimatize to their new homes had either returned back to the galaxy they had come from or stayed on not to teach, but to live on the planet.

Despite all the advancements and relative acceptance of their new home, Yuuzhan Vong culture was not so quickly changed. That was both bad and good, depending on how one took it.

Anakin guided Little Bantha back through the gate of his home, and dismounted it as members of Domain Rapuung came up to guide it back to its shed. The Domain had sworn themselves to his family after the war, and was in the process of rebuilding much like all the other Domains in the war. Having been reduced to little under a dozen people after the final battle, nearly half of the surviving warriors now had families of their own. Despite Anakin and Tahiri's protests, the Domain had declared themselves the 'official' protectors of the 'divine Solo family,' and there was little he or Tahiri could do to change their minds.

He nodded his thanks to the Yuuzhan Vong and continued on back to his house. With the Supreme Council not needing he and Tahiri as often, their life had become relatively uneventful. It had been one of the reasons why they had waited to give Cassa a little brother. They had wanted the situation to be more stable, wanted to have time to actually dote on the child rather than spend it zipping across the continent trying to keep Yuuzhan Vong society stable.

"*Welcome back, Anakin,"* a voice announced as Anakin entered his home.

"Thanks *Veila*."

"*Tahiri is in the backyard going over the checklist for tomorrow's war anniversary."* The ship informed. Being partially organic, and fully sentient, it was able to link up with the bora and yorik coral of the tree-house and use the living creatures as if it were a part of itself. The actual ship was parked on the roof of the building, and since the war's ending, had rarely been used. It often took off on its own to assist the Yuuzhan Vong ships on security patrols, or flew about with the Sekotian fliers in an almost childlike curiosity. In a way, it was a lot like another member of the family.

Anakin found his wife where the *Veila* had said she was. Tahiri was lounging in a wooden chair by the pool in their backyard, a hand absently stroking her swollen belly as she flipped through a datapad

with the other. The loose Jedi robe she wore did little to hide their developing child.
He reached around and kissed her cheek. "Hey there."
"Hey yourself," Tahiri tilted her head back. "Wanna give me a hand with this? Our little one's turned my brain to mush."
"Whatcha working on?"
"Seating arrangements for tomorrow's memorial," Tahiri handed him the datapad. "Taan doesn't want to make it look like the Supreme Council is showing favoritism by having any specific Domain in front or in back."
"We're remembering all who died during the war! It's happened every single year. Are the Domains *still* worried about seating arrangements?" Anakin groaned, taking the datapad from her.
"You know they are," Tahiri said. She got up, Anakin took her place, and she sat back down onto Anakin's lap, cuddling back up against him Looking at the datapad together, Anakin raised several eyebrows at Tahiri's choices. "You're putting Domains Ruuq and Pekeen together *and* in the back?"
"It's about time they learned to work together and that their game of one-upmanship isn't earning them any favors from us avatars of the gods."
"What about Domain Shul?"
"Huh? Who did I put them with?"
"Nar and Fath, in the front."
"Oh, oops. *That*, I didn't mean to do. Have Fath move to the middle and Nar to the back. They were both front last year."
"As you command," Anakin waved his hand to reorganize the list.
Tahiri shook her head in disbelief. "You know, even though those galaxy-endangering problems were life threatening, it's strange when the only thing we have to worry about out here is seating arrangements."
"Is it a good strange or bad strange?" Anakin asked, reaching around to rub her stomach.
"Good strange," Tahiri mumbled, the warmth of the twin suns in the sky and the comfort of his body lulling her. "I like having this life, the thought that this is what our kids will enjoy too. No intergalactic wars, no running for their lives our worrying if their friends are going to survive the day. I want them to have everything we didn't."
"I do too," Anakin said, absently rubbing her arm as he continued to assign seating to the myriad domains left on the list. "And we're definitely doing our best to make sure of it. Cassa's going to school,

has normal friends, doesn't have to worry about getting kidnapped or eaten by a krayt dragon."
"For once our divine status comes in handy. Everyone's too afraid of incurring the wrath of the Yun'o to hurt Cassa," Tahiri said, her amusement trickling through their bond. "And I doubt we'll find any krayt dragons here, even if this is a binary star system."
"They'll have that normal life," Anakin murmured. "We're all the way out here in the Unknown Regions, on the most peaceful planet the galaxy will probably ever know. I can't see how anything can ruin that."
{-[IV]-} {-[IV]-}
Night had fallen over Zonama Sekot once more, the twin suns finally dipping below the horizon as they had done every night for the past seven years. In the great tampasi of the living planet, bioluminescent plants, insects, and animals, all came to life lighting up the world in soft hues of blue, green, and pink. Despite the hour, the tampasi was bustling with much life, a new chorus of many animals and insects taking the place of those turning in for the night. The creatures the Yuuzhan Vong imported had settled peaceably among the native lifeforms already present, adding to the diversity of an already strange and unique world.
In the settlements, Yuuzhan Vong glow-bugs illuminated lamps and buildings. Unlike most populated worlds, there was no harsh artificial lighting bleeding up into the sky, no giant holo-signs advertising one product or another, or lines of noisy speeders still present in the sky. As night fell, the streets slowly emptied, workers returning home after a hard day's labor.
And as the daylight faded away, those on the planet were treated with a truly marvelous sight. Replacing the warm glow of the suns, was not a dazzling array of stars and planets, but a vast galaxy that filled the night's sky. For both safety and practicality, Zonama Sekot had settled in an exo-system that existed far outside the boundaries of the galaxy the Yuuzhan Vong had tried to invade. Every night, the inhabitants of the planet could see that galaxy above them, enthralling spirals of blues, whites, yellows, and purples amidst a field of the darkest of black. They could see every star system, every nebula and quasar. They were on the outside looking in.
"Are we ever going to go there?" Cassa Solo asked softly, reaching a small hand up to the galaxy innocently. She was tucked once more between her parents, staring through the open skylight of their home at the night's sky.
"One day," Tahiri said softly, lightly resting her head against the top of Cassa's. "One day, Cassa. We'll go to Tatooine, to Mon Calamari, to

Yavin Four, and all those other places your daddy and I tell you about in our stories."
"And see Ewoks and fish-people, and people with three eyes?" Cassa tilted her head up towards her mother.
"Yeah," Tahiri nodded.
"And I'll get to see daddy's brother and sister, and grandma and grandpa?"
"They'd definitely love you," Anakin smiled supportively. "I know it."
Cassa smiled shyly, turning her gaze back up at the spiral galaxy in the sky in wonder. "It's so big. Have you ever visited all of it, daddy?"
"No," Anakin laughed softly. "I don't think anyone has."
"Oh," Cassa blinked. She then brightened "Then we can go exploring together when we go back! Like how we did with Zonama when you took me to map the planet."
"We can definitely do that," Anakin shared a loving smile with his wife.
Cassa yawned a big yawn, rubbing at her eyes again. "Can you tell me a story, mommy?"
"Which one do you want to hear this time?"
"The one where daddy asked you to marry him," Cassa murmured, clinging to her mother's shirt. "I like that one."
"I do too," Tahiri said, running a hand through her daughter's hair.
"Alright then, do you remember how it starts?"
"Uh huh," Cass nodded tiredly. "You and daddy, and Uncle Jacen and Auntie Jaina and Auntie Tennie just finished beating Shimrra. Auntie Jaina took a shuttle to the Chiss, and Uncle Jacen and Auntie Tennie went back to the Hapes people. Mommy, when we go to that galaxy are we going to go to Hapes?"
"Definitely," Tahiri laughed. "So the others went to their shuttles. And me and daddy?"
"Well, you and daddy…"
Anakin supposed he had been in worse shape before. Then again, having his leg skewered by a lightsaber and shattered with the Force wasn't exactly something he would want to repeat in the future. Bruised, battered, covered in grime, and exhausted; his battle with Onimi had taken a lot out of him, emotionally, physically, and through the Force. He was still amazed at the raw power his older brother had produced to quite literally vaporize the insane Shamed One.
Anakin had grown up with people telling him that he was one of the strongest Jedi out there, that no one had as much Force potential since his uncle. And then to nearly fall to Onimi, see his brother save him and wipe the floor with seemingly little effort, it was a definite eye-opener. It was also a relief. Sure he wanted to win the war, beat

Shimrra and Onimi and go on to live in peace. But he could already imagine the furor it would cause, the pressure it would create, had he been the one to land that killing blow. It was far better for Jacen to have that honor, to have the attention he deserved.
He himself was quite content to fade away, to have a normal life for once after all the pressure.
"*Credit for your thoughts?" Tahiri asked, her head resting on his shoulder. She still had a nasty concussion from being kicked in the head by Shimrra, and she had only applied the barest of medical aid to the cuts and gashes that covered her.*
They were lying next to each other atop the remains of Shimrra's citadel, waiting for the Veila to finish operations and pick them up. Jaina, Jacen, and Tenel Ka had all departed only moments earlier, leaving the two of them alone. In the meantime, they simply continued to support themselves using their bond, fingers interlaced and breathing almost synchronized.
"*Just thinking about the future," Anakin answered.*
"*The future?"*
"Well, now that the war's finally over, I think it's safe to start planning for it."
"So tell me about it."
"Hmmm?"
"What's in this future you have in mind, Solo?" Tahiri murmured, her eyes closed as she just focused on the warmth of his body and Force presence.
"You, mostly. Us," Anakin said honestly, giving her hand a small squeeze. He gestured with his head up towards the looming shadow in the sky. "Living there on Zonama Sekot. Relaxed, helping the Yuuzhan Vong recover from centuries of warring."
"Sounds nice," Tahiri sighed. "But won't you miss the rest of your family?"
"You are my family," Anakin turned slightly to kiss the top of her head. "Jaya will be with the military or wherever else she'll end up. Jacen will be going on his galactic sight-seeing of Force sensitive cultures, and mom and dad will still be mired with politics no matter how badly they want to retire. Nothing much will change."
"And us?" Tahiri's voice was filled with the same exhaustion he felt. Both their bodies having been pushed too and over their limits during the fighting for Coruscant. "In this future of yours, you mentioned an 'us'."
"You, me," Anakin paused, a small rush of embarrassment heating his cheeks. "Any kids we might have."

"Oh?" Tahiri grinned slyly.
"Yeah," Anakin managed. His heart was beating quite rapidly from the emotions bouncing back and forth in their bond. "Tahiri."
"Hmmm?"
"What would you say if I asked you to marry me?"
Tahiri's eyes flew open as her sluggish mind registered the words. The words 'of course I will, dummy' were on the tip of her tongue. But then, when she went over his words again and realized what her dummy was actually asking, she raised an eyebrow at her boyfriend. Some part of her enjoyed the grimace on his face as he too reflected on his ill-chosen words.
"What are you looking for, prior approval?"
Anakin groaned. "That came out wrong."
"Try it again?"
"Yeah."
"On the bright side, you did have the sense to ask <u>after</u> everything life-threatening was finished."
"I was planning to ask you on the elevator ride to the top of Shimrra's tower, but Onimi kind of ruined the mood."
"You're going to make me be thankful of an insane Yuuzhan Vong who manipulated Shimrra into bringing their entire race to this galaxy?"
Despite her words, the swooping feeling of her stomach made her quiver in silent anticipation.
"Would you rather I slipped a ring on your finger while you were sleeping?"
"Would you rather be kicked where you really don't want to be?" Tahiri mock-glowered.
"Can I start over, please?"
"Waiting."
"Tahiri."
"Mhm?
Anakin swallowed nervously, not sure why asking such a thing was so hard. They'd already become lovers, were best friends, and yet the words he wanted to say continued to get tied up on his tongue.
He closed his eyes, his heart and mind awhirl with emotions and memories. He could recall every moment he had with her. The first time they met—her strangely bare feet pattering on the ground—their adventures from dark side corrupted temples to Yuuzhan Vong controlled planets. The first time he saw her as more than just 'a friend', their first kiss, the first time they made love. She was his partner, his friend, the one who somehow banished is negatude with her cheerily chatty and barefoot ways.

He hadn't realized that he had been thinking out loud, but a surge of emotion from Tahiri caused him to open his own eyes with a calmness that surprised even him. Looking into her wide and watery green eyes, Anakin smiled gently.
"*Tahiri Kwaad, my best friend, will you please marry…"*
Anakin was cut off as Tahiri crushed his lips to hers, kissing him fiercely and rolling on top of him in the process. His arms reflexively went around her and they held each other as the kiss slowly ended. He gazed up at her in giddy awe.
"…Me."
Eyes shining with happiness, Tahiri squeezed his hands and nodded once. "Yes!"
"And I haven't regretted that decision ever since," Tahiri finished softly, gazing mostly at her husband as she said it. Their daughter was fast asleep, wrapped up in physical blankets, but also in Force-created layers of their love for each other.
"I love you," Anakin whispered fondly, reaching over to squeeze her hand, the lambent gemstone of her ring glowing softly in the night.
"You too, Hero Boy. I love you too."
{-[V]-} {-[V]-}
"We have gathered here today to mark the seventh anniversary to the end of the war," former Warmaster Nas Choka began solemnly. His audience was a mix of Yuuzhan Vong and races from the galaxy they now shared. "To remember the lives lost on both sides. To vow once more to never again allow blind faith and trust to lead us astray, and to do our best to uphold the order of this galaxy."
The War Memorial on Zonama Sekot was a stone monument of the deepest of black that sat in the middle of a vast field of golden grass. It was a five meter high, circular monument with a radius of nearly a kilometer; that had etched within its surface the names of people and planets that had perished in the war. Though very few outside of Zonama Sekot visited the sprawling monument, those on the planet used it as a reminder of past ways and the cost those ways had inflicted on their peoples. Offerings were left in front of some of the sections, while warriors who had participated in the razing of one planet or another, could often be found just staring at the vast list of names for hours at a time. Vines adorned with flowers that glowed after sundown separated the panels of dark stone, allowing the names to be read even at night.
The names of Yuuzhan Vong on both sides of the war were listed, as were the names of countless New Republic/Galactic Alliance casualties. The names of planets often represented the entirety of their

populations, the names of World Ships indicating the millions of Yuuzhan Vong who perished upon their destruction. Ship names, space battles, the history of the war preserved in stone so that no one would forget a single moment of it, would forget the lives lost during the five year struggle.

"We've come a long way since then," Taan stepped up onto the dais. The twin suns were high in the sky, glinting off the sleek black obelisk around them. "Yuuzhan Vong work side-by-side with the Ferroans, with the people of this galaxy, to help create a home we can be proud of. A place to belong. But we cannot become complacent and revert back to old ways. We cannot ever forget that the cycle of continuous violence and lust for power brought us to the verge of extinction. The Yuuzhan Vong remain strong, but we now express our strength in ways that do not involve death or destruction. Instead, we are using our strength to build ourselves a new life in this distant galaxy. Even seven years out, there is still much that can be improved. But working together, with all Domains, I am certain we can overcome these challenges."

A shadow briefly passed by overhead, but the crowd was used to the various avian life-forms that inhabited the planet and paid no attention to it.

"We have achieved many things despite having nothing but each other when we first came to this planet," Taan continued. "Have made many friends and overcome much adversity. We have done our part to help repair a galaxy we ripped asunder, and through reflection, have continued to atone for our past. With every forward step we take, however, we must keep at least one eye back towards this monument, towards the past, so that the mistakes of our forbearers are never repeated again. We must continue to learn, spread knowledge so that all Yuuzhan Vong can continue to make enlightened decisions for themselves, and not rely on another's orders for their purpose. There is a reason why today marks a new year for us Yuuzhan Vong, why the end of the war was a rebirth of our people. We will not waste the opportunities afforded to us by the sacrifices made by this galaxy, by the hard work of the Jedi and aid they provide. Once again, we affirm our commitment to peace, to making this galaxy a better place. Jedi Tahiri Solo, would you be willing to make a statement, for old time's sake?"

Tahiri, sitting with her family, smiled and nodded. The Jedi had gradually been phasing themselves out of the ceremony as the years went on. The first anniversary, she and Anakin had been the keynote speakers, still the 'Avatars' of the Yun'o. But as time went on, they

gradually gave way to the Yuuzhan Vong leadership in a clear sign of transition and progress.
Tahiri stood as the shadow from before swooped by again. "Thank you, Supreme Leader Taan." As the young woman made her way through the front rows of seats, the first in a line of hundreds, she was suddenly filled with dread. The Force was trying to warn her, was like a blaring alarm telling her something was about to go wrong.
The other Jedi in the audience looked around in confusion, likewise sensing the sudden wrongness that had suddenly filled the memorial ceremony.
Gazes were slowly directed into the air. The shadow they thought had been a bird, wasn't any bird at all but a shuttle with its hatch down. The flash of light that left the hatch was almost in slow motion as a superheated projectile lanced through the air. For a moment, nothing else seemed to move, everyone completely stunned by the sniper and shuttle crews' daring.
At the last moment, however, Nas Choka leaped in front of Taan, intercepting the shot that had been meant for her with his own body. Chaos broke out in the clearing.
Even as the shuttle began a sharp ascent, the sniper continued to fire, picking off members of the Supreme Council with deadly accuracy. The enclosed circular nature of the monument made it a death trap, as those by the speaking dais had nowhere to go. Eight Supreme Council members were killed before the Jedi could get into any position to cover them. Four other Yuuzhan Vong in the audience were also cut down.
But the sniper wasn't the only assailant. Streaming from out of the back of the open shuttle was a barrage of grenades and rockets, fired carelessly into the thousands of people in the audience. Explosions echoed loudly as bodies were thrown into the air or vanished in clouds of fire and shrapnel. The shuttle continued to pull away, with the gunmen never one ceasing their assault.
Zonama Sekot's response was immediate as it unleashed a storm of psionic energy at the shuttle. The shuttle, however, appeared to shrug it off as it continued upwards and out of the atmosphere. The hatch finally closed and the ship disappeared into the safety of space.
"There were ysalamiri onboard," Sekot formed into the Ferroan Magister, her face a mask of anger. "Many of them. I could not touch it without wrecking havoc on other parts of this planet."
"Scramble the defense forces! Tell Loiric Kaan that he's in charge now!" Drathul barked, holding the body of one of his fellow council members. "They will pay for this outrage!"

"It's too late, the shuttle has already disappeared into darkspace," reported a warrior.
"*Grakh*!" Drathul cursed. "Assemble them anyways! Whoever did this has just declared war on us and we will respond in kind!"
In the meantime, Tekli, Tahiri, Cassa, and Anakin quickly ran over to Taan and Nas Choka. The Chadra Fan healer knelt down next to the former Warmaster and reached in to check for a pulse. After a second, she looked up at the Solos and wearily shook her head.
"No," Tahiri whispered, looking pale and very ill.
Tekli then moved over to a deathly still Taan. Because Nas Choka had retired from the life of a warrior, he hadn't been wearing any armor, and despite his heroic sacrifice, the sniper bolt had punched clean through his unarmored body.
"She's still alive, only just," Tekli reached into a side-pouched and pulled out a Yuuzhan Vong bandage. "Tahiri, I'm going to need you to use your VongForce to stabilize her. The injury is severe and… Tahiri?"
Tekli looked up. Tahiri was gripping her stomach almost fearfully, her eyes wide. "Not now," she whispered, gritting her teeth.
"The baby?" Anakin whispered worriedly
Tahiri just nodded, her hands clenched tightly as she tried to even out her breathing.
"The stress of the situation must have induced the labor," Tekli grimaced, her hands covered with Taan's blood. "You're nearly full term, and the child was healthy when I last checked, so there should be no complications."
"Focus on Taan," Tahiri managed, reflexively using the Force to reach out to Anakin.
Danni Quee managed to push to the crowd to reach their side. She took one look at Tahiri, and another at Taan, before looking to Tekli.
"The call for healers has already gone out. Where do you need me?"
"Here," Tekli nodded, handing Danni an injector and gesturing to Taan.
"Anakin, can you handle the birth of your son?"
Anakin, his arms wrapped supportively around his wife, nodded. "I saw what you did for Cassa."
"I'll help," the five year old added.
"News from the capitol," Ne'rai Rin, one of the surviving Supreme Council members called out over the ruckus. "Three shuttles of similar make, and apparently packed with explosives, just made suicidal dives into heavily populated regions. They likewise had gunmen fire on the city before their dives. Death tolls still coming in but already over three thousand!"
"The city of Yun-Harla reports that the Shimrraists are rioting again."

Drathul cursed once more. "Tell the order keepers to use any means necessary to get them under control! We won't be fighting amongst ourselves when factions of this galaxy are obviously still fighting the war!"
Tahiri, panting heavily as the pangs of labor coursed through her, gripped Anakin's hand tightly. "Anakin stop Drathul! Ne'rai doesn't have the supporters to stand up to him, and you know he's always been opposed to Taan's pacifistic policies."
"And you?"
"Just stop him!" Tahiri gritted out, gasping in pain. "Cassa can help me."
Anakin clenched his jaw, but nodded, stood, and strode over to the former High Prefect.
"Drathul!"
"Avatar of Yun-Ne'shel?"
"Violence and a heavy hand only cause more trouble in the end, remember that," Anakin said sharply, staring down the grizzled Yuuzhan Vong. "Taan's policies have worked for seven years now."
"With respect, Jedi Solo. They were policies in peacetime," Drathul countered. "Now over half our leadership is dead and Taan lies on death's door. Thousands of lives have been taking already. Different times call for different policies."
"Allow logic and cool minds to think this through first. We might still have need for your ways, but there are always other options. A departure from Taan's ways will lead the rest of your race to believe that she has been slain, and you know full well the panic and anger that will cause."
Anakin could see that he had made his point. Taan was wildly popular among most of the Yuuzhan Vong population due to her clear differences from Shimrra, and it was her leadership that gave the Supreme Council its legitimacy. Though Taan did her best to minimize her footprint in the Yuuzhan Vong council, her words and beliefs still held much weight with the population of Zonama Sekot.
Drathul clicked his tongue in displeasure as he held up the villip cluster. "Intendants of Yun-Harla, disperse the riots as best you can but refrain from using violence if at all possible. I will be sending a yorik-akaga with more assistance in a moment."
"Thank you," Anakin inclined his head briefly.
Drathul huffed and stormed away, finding a group of warriors and demanding updates.
Anakin quickly turned back to his wife, who was panting heavily and gripping one of Cassa's hands. The five year old girl's eyes were

determined as she reinforced her mother, simultaneously communicating to her yet-to-be-born brother to 'come out soon and stop hurting mommy.' Anakin rejoined them, a flood of healers and medical staff finally descending upon the area.
"Tahiri?" Anakin said, kissing her sweat slickened hair and drawing some of her pain away.
"Taan?" Tahiri breathed, squeezing her eyes shut.
Anakin saw the Supreme Leader being loaded onto a gurney with Tekli at her side, surrounded by a bunch of determined looking healers.
"She's in the best of hands."
Tahiri nodded weakly, grimacing as the contractions became more frequent. Two Yuuzhan Vong healers glanced over to the Solo family, realized what was happening, and promptly moved to assist.
"Hang in there," Anakin coaxed.
"You say the most ridiculous things ever, Hero Boy," Tahiri emitted a pained laugh. "Go, keep an eye on Drathul and get to the bottom of this."
"Are you sure?"
"This isn't my first time giving birth you know," Tahiri said wryly.
"Right," Anakin put a hand on her stomach and briefly touched his son with the Force. "I'll be by as soon as I can. Cassa, take care of your mom, okay?"
The five year old, already bossing the two healers around in the Yuuzhan Vong tongue, nodded. "I will, daddy."
The healers carted away Tahiri and Cassa, leaving him behind amidst the ruined remains of the ceremony.
Anakin stood, cursing his genes and desperately hoping that his son and daughter didn't inherit the same proclivity for adventure and disaster as he seemed to have gotten from his own parents. Gazing around the memorial, for the first time, he realized just how bad the attack had been. Stray sniper shots had blasted holes in the black stone of the memorial. Blood stains coated the ground and were splashed against the dark rock like water. Most of the bodies still lay where they had fallen, the healers concentrating more on the injured that they could save. Small craters of charred ground, from grenade and rocket blasts, pockmarked the surroundings. Chairs were collapsed and in disarray, and the small bouquets of flowers left as offerings along the wall were stomped upon and destroyed.
Drathul and the surviving members of the Supreme Council approached him, their faces grim. "Jedi Solo."
"Drathul, Ne'rai, Zhul, Rakh, Kal'thir, Tsanzi," Anakin acknowledged each by name.

"We have a request of you. While we attempt to keep order and prevent all that we have accomplished from falling apart, we ask that you return to your Jedi Order and figure out who is responsible for this attack."
"Me?"
"Yes, you would be able to accomplish a whole lot more than a team of Yuuzhan Vong investigators," Ne'rai answered. "As a Jedi, you command the respect of the galaxy. But as Yuuzhan Vong, we have only their hatred and resentment. They will show no sympathy were we to begin asking questions."
Anakin ran a harried hand through his hair as he nodded. "I'll go. The moment Tahiri is stable and our son is okay, we'll depart to the Core. I hope you're able to keep the order after this."
"It will be our first real challenge as a people," Ne'rai said evenly. "Our first real challenge without the guidance of the Jedi. The times will be interesting, to say the least. Let us hope the gods still smile upon us given how much has changed since our warring ways."
"And let us hope this was an act by disgruntled individuals and not a planet or government-sanctioned attack," Drathul growled. "The war may have been declared over, but Yuuzhan Vong are not fangless, and we will not tolerate such a direct attack on our peoples. If you are unable to conclude this matter in a satisfactory manner, we *will* respond with the full force of our defensive fleets."
"Understood," Anakin tilted his head. "Thank you for at least giving a chance for peaceful means to prevail."
"We will return to Yun-Yuuzhan and attempt to limit the political fallout of this attack," Zhul Yim said. "Those who were once warriors will no doubt be clamoring to pick up their amphistaffs once more."
"We'll also be halting trade and recalling our shaper teams," Ne'rai said. "Until we discover the culprit I do not want to have Yuuzhan Vong isolated anywhere in the galaxy. The faster you find answers, Anakin Solo, the sooner healing can resume."
{-[VI]-} {-[VI]-}
In the days following the attack, the scene at the Solo Estate was a frantic hive of activity. There was much to be done, loose ends to tie up, before Anakin and Tahiri could return to the galaxy that had been their home for much of their teenage lives. Early investigations of the attacks on main settlements had revealed that nearly all of the body-parts of the attackers that had been found had come from Bothans. Most of the evidence had been badly destroyed in the ensuing fires and destruction, but it had given Anakin and the others going with his family a starting point.

"Leave it to a few insane nut-jobs to get all of us together again, and back into that place we called home," Danni Quee remarked, directing several members of Domain Rin and Domain Rapuung. "Not the sort of homecoming reason I was hoping for though."
"You sure you want to come with us?" Anakin asked, carrying a crate of supplies. "You have a great life here."
"So do you," Danni retorted. "I may not be a Jedi, but when my friends, my home, and everything I fought for is threatened, there's no way I'm going to put on blinders and pretend everything is right in this galaxy."
Tahiri emerged from one of the side-rooms with their newborn son clutched to her chest. Cassa was at her side, with a backpack over her shoulders and a carry-on case being dragged through the dirt behind her. Tekli was with them, acting as Tahiri's personal healer and constantly checking on the newborn with the Force.
"We're ready," Tahiri said determinedly.
Anakin nodded, using the Force to send his love to his wife and children. "Then get onboard the *Veila.* Danni and I can handle the rest out here."
"{Wait for me!}" The voice of Cassa's Twi'lek friend sounded out over the hustle and bustle occurring in the courtyard of the Solo Estate. Cassa whirled around and saw the red-skinned Twi'lek vault over the fence and weave her way through the ranks of busy Yuuzhan Vong.
"Jedis'sei?"
The six year old Twi'lek skidded to a halt in front of the bemused Solos and Danni Quee.
"{Jedis'sei, what are you doing here?}" Cassa exclaimed.
"{My parents said I could go with you. That I should become a Jedi like you and your mommy and daddy,}" Jedis'sei puffed, stopping to catch her breath. She had on a backpack of her own and appeared to be clutching to a scruffy-looking stuffed bantha that was her favorite toy.
"{Please, Masters Solo. Will you let me come with you?}"
Tahiri and Anakin exchanged looks. Both of Jedis'sei's parents had been slaves to the Hutts, and then to the Yuuzhan Vong, before being freed when the Jedi took Ylesia. They were among the hundreds who had become worshipers of the 'Jedi cult' that Taan had initially started on the planet. Though many had since been rehabilitated, the former slaves that had settled on Zonama Sekot had all embraced that religion full-heartedly. Both Jedi-worship and the Yun'o were the two prevailing and often complimentary religions that existed in the pockets of Yuuzhan Vong on Zonama Sekot.
"We might not come back here for a long time," Anakin said gently. "Are you sure?"

Jedis'sei nodded. "{My parents say that it is the will of the Force, and that I am not to question its ways. I'll miss them, but at least I'll have Cassa.}"
"If you're sure," Anakin said slowly, receiving a nod of permission from his wife. "Then welcome aboard."
The pint-sized Twi'lek beamed and promptly gave both Anakin and Tahiri fierce hugs, and then eagerly bounced over to Cassa. The two began talking kilometers a minute as they re-entered the Solo Estate to ascend to the landing platform on its roof.
Danni chuckled.
"What?" Anakin said.
"Nothing," Danni replied slyly. "Anakin Solo the family-man. That's one thing I don't think the galaxy's ready for."
Tahiri patted Anakin's arm affectionately. "We'll survive somehow. See you onboard."
Anakin waved Tahiri and Tekli away, and resumed the coordination of supplies.
"Food stores and clothing are all packed up," Anakin read off a datapad. "And we have those extra boxes of science stuff that you wanted to bring along."
"'Science stuff'? Really, Anakin?" Danni said in a mock huff. "That's like me saying 'droid thingies' and calling all those wires and gizmos you tinker with 'computer stuff.'"
"My apologies," Anakin said sarcastically. "What else is on the list?"
Danni scrolled through a Yuuzhan Vong qahsa, their equivalent of a computer. "Credits, check. Sentimental doodads, check. We've got our orders from the Supreme Council, even the unofficial ones, check. And we've already coordinated with Domains Rapuung and Cha to take care of our places while we're gone, so check and check."
"Looks like that's it then?" Anakin released a low breath, taking in the sight of his home for the past seven years.
"Looks like it," Danni said, reluctantly. "I could always add on a few miscellaneous items, you know, to give us another couple of minutes."
"Probably shouldn't. We've delayed enough as it is."
"Hey, Tahiri just gave birth. You're supposed to give a girl a break after that."
"And we had to see if Taan would survive," Anakin reminded. "And then we had to say our goodbyes to practically all the Yuuzhan Vong on the planet."
"You're right," Danni sighed. "I'm going to miss this planet. The peace was nice while it lasted."

As if on cue, a swirl of dust, seeds, and branches formed out of nowhere, solidifying into the image of Ahsi-Sekot.
"Sekot," Both Danni and Anakin bowed politely. The Yuuzhan Vong around them, however, still dropped down to their knees and prostrated before the avatar of the planet.
"Still working on that, I see," Ahsi-Sekot grimaced at the ranks of Yuuzhan Vong around her. "Maybe I should have materialized on the other side of the gate and walked in."
"Come to give us a send off?" Anakin asked.
"Yes," Ahsi-Sekot said solemnly. "Your presence, especially that of your children, will be sorely missed."
"Look after yourself, and everyone else, Sekot," Danni said, doing what very few people were brave enough to do as she hugged the avatar. Even Sekot seemed taken aback, but returned the gesture. "I will, Danni Quee. Your insights will not be forgotten either."
Danni and Anakin bowed one last time.
"Farewell for now," Sekot said. "I do not think this will be the last time we see each other."
"I hope not," Anakin replied. "Goodbye."
"Goodbye," Danni echoed.
Ahsi-Sekot inclined her head and gestured to the *Veila.* "Your ship awaits you, Anakin Solo, Danni Quee."
The two picked up their own packs and slung them over their shoulders. The next few minutes were passed in contemplative silence later while they passed through the Solo Estate and climbed up to its roof. From the top of the bora, they gazed about the sprawling landscape of Zonama Sekot and exchanged knowing shakes of their heads.
"Leaving is so much harder than I thought it would be."
"Now I know how the Ferroans felt when we interrupted their lives," Anakin agreed. He tapped the outside of the *Veila*, and the hatch opened. "Come on, before everything gets a bit too hard to leave behind."
Danni stepped up into the hybrid vessel, casting one last look of longing at the distant landscape before her.
"Welcome aboard Creator Quee," The *Veila* said in a sing-song voice through the ship's internal speakers. The child-like nature of the ship temporarily distracted Danni from her reluctance to leave.
"Hi, it's been a while, *Veila.*" Danni ran her hand along the living bulkhead of the ship. "Ready to take us back to civilization?"
"I guess. I like it here though."

"I do too." She and Anakin made their way to the cockpit. "Begin lift-off."
Anakin took the pilot's chair and Danni the co-pilot's, each donning a cognition hood to better their link with the ship.
Lifting off, came the *Veila's* thought message.
The hybrid vessel hummed to life, slowly rising above the estate below. Almost as if giving them a send off, flocks of iridescent birds took wing and began to circle around them. Sekotian fliers also joined in, floating alongside the ship in parade formation. Like its occupants, the *Veila* appeared to want to stretch its time on the planet for as long as it could as it kept a low profile, circumnavigating the planet at a relatively slow speed.
The various Yuuzhan Vong settlements and villages passed by below, its occupants emerging from their houses to wave at the passing vessel. The *Veila* continued her self-plotted course, flying over the tampasi, the Ferroan villages, Far-Distance, Middle Distance, and everything in between. One last grand tour of the living planet and its peoples.
All the while, the wildlife kept up. Schools of fishes leaping out of the water as the *Veila* flew over the sea. Herds of creatures galloping through open plains, bellowing mournfully. Multi-colored fliers, glittering insects, swirling rushes of pollen and leaves, accompanied the vessel whenever they could.
Anakin could feel his wife and Cassa enjoy the sights through the primary meeting-room's set of cognition hoods; seeing and feeling the planet through the *Veila's* senses.
A final goodbye from Sekot.
"We're coming back here," Danni said, sounding as forlorn as Anakin looked.
"Definitely."
The *Veila* passed over the settlement of Yun-Yuuzhan, and the crowds that had come out to send it off, before finally beginning her ascent. As it left the atmosphere, the ships of the Yuuzhan Vong Defense Force picked up the celebratory escort. Flights of coralskippers alternated being the honor guard, larger vessels firing off their guns in salute. It was a hero's send-off. An honor fit for the gods. A thank you for all the work the occupants of the *Veila* had contributed. No one on the planet would ever doubt that it was because of them that the Yuuzhan Vong were as strong as they were, had retained much of the pride that they had had during the war. The Jedi had given them a chance to recover, to become more, and the Yuuzhan Vong, and Sekot itself, would always be grateful for that opportunity.

"Leaving Zonama Sekot's gravity shadow," Anakin announced over the inter-ship comm.
"Where to first?" Danni asked. "Bothawui?"
"No, set a course for the Jedi Praxeum at Ossus," Anakin instructed. "We can get caught up on the state of the galaxy there, before we slog through the politics this investigation is undoubtedly going to run into."
"Setting course for Ossus, then," Danni reluctantly punched in the coordinates, still focused on the rapidly shrinking ball of blue and green behind them.
"Hey, we're coming back," Anakin took on the role of reassure-er this time.
"Yeah," Danni said half-heartedly. "Coordinates in."
"Veila," Anakin said aloud. "Whenever you're ready."
"Entering hyperspace in five. Four. Three. Two. One."
The *Veila* seemed to freeze for a fraction of a second before it disappeared into hyperspace in the single blink of an eye. Into hyperspace and back to the galaxy it had left seven long years ago. Back to the galaxy and to the many adventures that awaited them.
{-[End of Scene One]-}
A\N: Well, we're a third of the way through Act One. The next six chapters will also be out of order chronologically so once again if you want to wait until they're all posted, feel free to do so (only a four week wait since I plan for two double-update weeks). In order chronologically they are: Corellia (Chapter 9), Zekk (8)-Jaina (12), Anakin (7), Turi (11), Jacen (10). So that means the next chapter is Anakin-centric once more. See you all next week!
Deleted Scenes:
Haven't had one of these in a while. When I first committed to doing a sequel, I was initially going to follow canon's Dark Nest trilogy as closely as I had NJO's Yuuzhan Vong War. Not only would the story format have been more like aDA and not single-story chapters, many things would have been different from the story now. That thought lasted for about thirty-thousand words, before I decided to scrap the idea. In any case, here's a couple of the scenes of 'what could have been.' Note, in the Anakin scene, Shaeri had actually died during the war (I hadn't yet decided on her fate when I started brainstorming story ideas). Again, these have minimal edits, so there'll probably be more than a few typos.
Scene 1:
Anakin gently wrapped one arm around his wife as he marveled at the small bundle of life cradled protectively against her chest. His other arm was supporting their almost five year old daughter, a bright-eyed,

intelligent blond, who had inherited Tahiri's curly hair but his own blue eyes. As befitting of a child of two powerful Force users raised on a Force-aware, sentient planet, Cassa Solo was very strong in the Force; showing a natural aptitude for telekinesis and movement-enhancing abilities. She was also every bit the tom-boy Tahiri had been. It was hard enough trying to find a hyper four year old. It was even harder when she could jump onto a two-story house or outrun her minders, even with her small legs, laughing all the way.
"She's my sister?" The blond girl peered at the bundle.
"Yes, Cassa," Anakin chuckled softly. "She's your sister."
"She's so tiny," Cassa whispered. She wiggled out of her dad's grip to get closer. In the background, Tekli managed a small laugh at Cassa's comment.
"Thank the Force for that," Tahiri smiled faintly at the Chadra Fan healer, her forehead still glistening with evidence of her exertions. "She sure didn't feel tiny."
"You're definitely amazing," Anakin murmured, bending down to give her a kiss.
"What's her name?" Cassa Solo asked, looking on in awe as she very gently slipped a finger into the newborn's tiny pink hand.
"Shaeri Solo," Tahiri gazed down at the sleeping baby as memories of her slain friend left her feeling slightly melancholy.
As if sensing the shift in emotion, Cassa immediately climbed into the bed next to her mom and hugged her tightly. Tahiri smiled at the gesture and shifted so that Cassa could snuggle against her. In addition to her physical Force abilities, Cassa was also highly empathic when it came to her parents; thriving the best when she could feel her parents' happiness and love.
Anakin joined the group-hug, surrounding the three most important females in his life with as much love as he possibly could. He couldn't imagine a life without them, nor did he want to.
"Love you too, daddy," Cassa murmured, contently smooshed between her parents.
"I…" Anakin inhaled sharply as a powerful surge rippled through the Force, calling him, entreating him for help. Whoever was sending the message had a massive amount of strength as the urge to go echoed and redoubled within him with every passing second. The same urge was filling Tahiri, beckoning her to return to the galaxy they had left. A powerful hand pulling her towards a set location.
They were vaguely aware of Tekli staggering towards the door, as if in a trance, while the call to return sounded throughout the Force.

Shaeri began to cry in distress, and Cassa' s forehead scrunched in bewilderment. "Daddy? Mommy?"
Her voice, and Shaeri's cries, filtered through the powerful Force summoning and snapped Tahiri out of the trance.
Tahiri inhaled sharply and hugged her daughters tightly to herself, anchoring herself to their presences. She couldn't obey the summons. She had to take care of Cassa and Shaeri. Hers and Anakin's daughters. There was nothing more important than those two.
Anakin likewise focused on his family, summoning every ounce of willpower and strength to resist the call that was pulling on the very fiber of his being. But it was difficult. It was as a thousand hands were tugging on his mind, urging him to leave Zonama Sekot and join with them.
A small swell of warmth formed at his chest as Cassa's untrained Force presence enveloped him in a wild nimbus of innocent emotion.
"You can't have my daddy!" Cassa declared, her small hands gripping Anakin's shirt possessively.
Tahiri likewise reached out to her husband, using the strength of their bond to reinforce his own abilities. Gradually the calling began to fade. It was still present, but not as strong as before.
Anakin focused on steadying his breath, feeling Cassa still clinging to him and hearing her mutter, 'my daddy, not yours,' over and over again. Cassa's Force presence continued to surround him like a shimmering veil, trapping in Tahiri's and her own feelings for him. He ran a hand through her hair and nodded weakly. "I'm okay, Cas. I'm okay."
The blond girl looked up at him with frightened blue eyes. "What was that, daddy?"
Anakin swallowed and glanced to his wife. He had recognized the Force presence that had called to him; barely. It had been warped and twisted, but the overall feeling was still the same. As impossible as it should have been, the identity of the caller was unmistakable.
"An old friend," Anakin murmured, still unable to believe what he had felt. "An old friend who's supposed to be dead."
"What does that mean?" Cassa chirped.
"It means," Tahiri said softly, her eyes meeting her husband's in understanding. "That something bad is happening. We have to return to our galaxy."
Scene 2: *Here's the storyline from Jacen and Tenel Ka's point of view. At this stage of development, I was keeping with the Dark Nest's portrayal of Jacen as someone who was just a bit mysterious, morals slowly eroding, and knew things the other Jedi didn't. Allana also hasn't*

yet been conceived in this storyline, though she most certainly would not have been a product of any fleet-for-a-baby deal in any case.
Tenel Ka was in the process of trying to ward off the latest Force bombardment when she heard several bodies fall to the ground.
"Not now," she whispered to herself. The pain of trying to defend herself against the thousands of minds pulling against her own, of trying to bury herself in the duty of Queen Mother and not bend to the wishes of these alien minds, was taking all her concentration. If this was yet another assassination attempt, she had neither the strength nor focus to defend herself. The blaring alarms sounding throughout the palace didn't help any.
The door to her chamber opened, and Tenel Ka's last two bodyguards quickly moved in front of her.
One of her twin bodyguards said curtly "Your Highness, continue to resist whatever Jedi battle you're engaged in."
"We'll protect you," the other finished, twirling a vibrostaff expertly.
Tenel Ka focused her blurry vision on the door and saw three figures standing there, all dressed in black. After a moment of alarm, she realized that one of them was Force sensitive.
"Taryn, Trista," Tenel Ka managed to get out. "One of them can use the Force."
The Zel twins tensed. "We'll fall before we let them harm you."
The Force-sensitive assassin let out a braying laugh. "The two of you wouldn't last one second against me."
With a flick of his wrist he lifted both young women up in a suffocating Force grip. Rather than panic and reach for their necks as most people would do, both Zel twins took action. Trista kicked her boot, and the knife embedded within the toe shot out like a dagger. The assailant caught the blade in another Force bubble, but was unprepared for Taryn, who managed to raise her blaster and fire several times.
To avoid being hit, the Force sensitive assassin was forced to release the twins and activate his own lightsaber. Both twins dropped into a three point stance and slowly straightened, their weapons raised. No longer where they the naïve twelve-year olds they had once been during the Yuuzhan Vong war. Now twenty, they were among the elite of Tenel Ka's bodyguard and had the skills to back it up.
"Don't think that just because you can use the Force, we'll be cowered by you," Taryn hissed, ceasing her fire to avoid having her own shots reflected back at her.
"We've had a Jedi help train us against any potential Force sensitive assassins," Trista added, spinning a vibroblade in either hand. "Surrender and we'll spare your life."

The assassin snarled and gestured to his subordinates, "Take care of the bodyguards. The Queen Mother is mine."
Rather than tense at the anticipated approach of the man's lackeys, both red-headed bodyguards grinned and relaxed.
When neither of his subordinates advanced, the Force sensitive turned around and found himself face to face with a pair of intense brown eyes. "You're wrong about that, buddy. She's *mine*."
"Here for another secret visit, Jacen Solo," Taryn said glibly. "Although given the number of times you visit, they're getting harder and harder to keep secret."
"I was in the neighborhood," Jacen nodded, pressing a hand to the startled assailant's head. The man's eyes rolled back into his head, and he dropped to the floor. Behind Jacen were the man's two subordinates, similarly incapacitated. "Though I'd drop by. So, which of Tenel Ka's relations managed to hire a Force sensitive, lightsaber wielding assassin?"
"We have several culprits in mind. General Livette will investigate the matter, but it's doubtful we'll find anything," Trista said, leaning down to relieve the three assassins of their weapons. "Taryn and I can take care of these three. You care for the Queen Mother. Something's been wrong with her lately, I think it has to do with the Force."
"You're right," Jacen said. "Don't worry though, I'll take care of it."
"Thank you." The Zel twins left the room with their unconscious burdens in tow.
Jacen walked up to Tenel Ka and knelt before her chair. "Hey."
"Jacen?"
"Who else?" Jacen smiled. "Having problems with voices in your head?"
Tenel Ka blinked weakly, as if barely comprehending his words, and then nodded feebly. Her lone hand was gripping the edge of a plastisteel table in a white knuckled grip as another Force bombardment hit her.
"Those pesky hive minds really can be annoying," Jacen remarked, placing his hand on Tenel Ka's sweat-slickened one. He closed his eyes and their Force presences and breathing fell into sync with the other. They called on their bond, and gradually Tenel Ka's natural strength and will-power began to win out.
Tenel Ka's pained grey eyes cleared, and she sagged as the incessant bombardment of her mind abated. "That was most unpleasant."
"No kidding," Jacen remarked. "If it wasn't for Vergere's lessons, and all the other little tricks I've picked up in my travels, I'd probably have ended up like Jaina."

Tenel Ka leaned against Jacen's chest as she rebuilt her strength.
"Jaina?"
"Yeah, she's with the Killiks at the moment. The others will find out soon enough."
Tenel Ka looked up at Jacen skeptically. "You are speaking in riddles again."
"Don't worry, I'll explain. It's kind of why I'm here," Jacen helped Tenel Ka to her feet and half-carried her to the bed. "But for now, you get some rest. There'll be plenty of time for explanations later."
Final Deleted Scene:*Continuing the theme of the abandoned storyline, this is what would have been Jaina Solo's opening bit. There are several other scenes, revolving around Jacen, Zekk, and the Jedi Council, that follow the 'Killiks taking over NJO Jedi' storyline. There are also several versions of each scene. When I couldn't come up with something I liked, I scrapped the entirety of it and wrote what you've been reading these past six chapters.*
Jaina Solo was furious as she stormed through the hallways of the Chiss Star Destroyer *Csilla*. As the Galactic Alliance official ambassador to the Chiss, she was primarily responsible for keeping the Outer Rim region of Chiss space clear of threats, but also all things diplomatic. Her rage was currently due to the second of her two duties. Unlike her primary duty, lightsabers and blasters didn't really help when it came to politics and intrigue.
"Jagged!" Jaina hissed in a low voice, entering his office.
Assistant Syndic Jagged Fel glanced up from a datapad. "Ambassador Solo."
"Did you think I wouldn't find out?" Jaina said, using the Force to keep her anger out of her words. Unfortunately, one of the casualties that had come with being the Galactic Alliance ambassador to the Chiss was her relationship with Jagged Fel. Politics, mixed with clashing cultures and duty, often putting them on opposite sides of whatever matter was being discussed. The animosity from the diplomatic negotiations had carried over to their private life and they had split two years after the Yuuzhan Vong war had ended.
"About?"
"Don't play stupid *Assistant Syndic Fel*," Jaina threw several datapads onto Jag's desk. "That datapad contains troop movements, *Chiss* troop movements, in systems outside of acknowledged Chiss territory. And those two are evidence that the Chiss have launched an all-out attack on the Killik hives in the Qoribu system!"
"I don't see what you're so upset about, Jaina. The Chiss are well within their rights to defend their own space from outside invaders."

"Just five months ago, the Qoribu system wasn't even *in* Chiss space," Jaina said tersely. "Once you expanded into that system and found that there were Killiks there, the Ascendancy went to the Galactic Alliance to mediate the dispute. In response, a full team of Jedi Knights was sent in. Jedi Knight Jalinae and those with her, Balos, Nixa, and Maez, were said to have been making progress in the last few weeks."
"Jaina, we went to the Galactic Alliance for advice. It doesn't mean that the Ascendancy has to listen to it. We've tried it your way, and what happened? In the months since then, the Killiks nests have expanded to twenty other moons. They've even been spotted outside the system deeper into Chiss space."
"That's not all," Jaina said, pointing to the last datapad. "The Imperial Remnant has also launched a formal complaint. They have taken great offense to the Chiss annexing several major systems in the Prefsbelt and Velcar sectors and claim that the Ascendancy is ignoring their diplomatic messages."
"The Ryloon, Churruma, and Marquarra systems all voted to join the Ascendancy," Jag replied evenly. "It is not my fault that the Ascendancy is in better condition than the current Remnant and can offer them more. Our societies are more than compatible, so there is little fear of a loss of culture either. The heads of each of those systems all thought out the process before joining the Ascendancy. If the Remnant has any issues, they should take it up with those systems."
"Jag," Jaina exhaled. "The Chiss Ascendancy is flirting with two wars."
"It is a good thing I made the creation of Chiss Star Destroyers and Clawcraft a priority when I stepped in for my father, then, isn't it?" Jag steepled his fingers. "The Chiss Ascendancy has heard and acknowledges the complaint lodged by their allies from the Galactic Alliance. But the Ascendancy will do any and everything required to protect both its people and its territory. We gave the Jedi a chance to resolve the Killik incident, but that incident has only since worsened. We informed the Imperials that we would be absorbing their systems of those systems voted to come to us, and we have. The Galactic Alliance is an important ally, but they have no power, nor the right, to dictate to the Ascendancy our internal policies and our right to expand our territory."
"You have the right to expand your territory, but *not* at the expense of the Galactic Alliance member-systems."
"The Ascendancy believes otherwise," Jag noted coolly. "Now, is that all?"

Jaina's brandy-brown eyes darkened furiously and her jaw was set. "No, that is *not* all. If full war does break out, just know that the Galactic Alliance will have no cause to support…"

Jaina stopped mid-sentence as she was suddenly swept up in an almost blinding maelstrom of Force energy. Her fury and anger at the Chiss Ascendancy's audacity was amplified many times over. And that fury was suddenly inundated by a wave of sorrow at the many lives that had been lost, the many homes that had been burned. These alien Chiss weren't her friends or allies. No one who killed indiscriminately like they did could be trusted.

The brown-haired woman spun out of Jag's office and stormed her way to the hangar bay. The Chiss couldn't be trusted, they were nothing. She had to protect those the Chiss wanted to hurt. She was a Jedi. Over and over again these thoughts bombarded her. She had to leave the Chiss and join those they were oppressing.

With seasoned skill, Jaina piloted her X-wing out of the ship and darted away into hyperspace.

Back in the office of the Assistant Syndic in charge of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Forces, Jagged rubbed at his forehead in an attempt to ward off a pounding headache. His break up from Jaina had been a mutual thing, with politics spoiling what had been a very passionate and physical relationship. He still loved Jaina, but he also had his duty to the Ascendancy. He knew that being Assistant Syndic wouldn't be easy, but stepping into his father's place had proven much more stressful than even he could have anticipated.

With the war with the Yuuzhan Vong over, the Chiss High Command had been determined not to get caught flat-footed ever again. Those in power subtly, and not so subtly, pressured Jag into building up their fleets, adding more Star Destroyers than they probably needed. Even though it was peacetime, the Chiss Expansionary fleets had nearly fifty Star Destroyers and countless supporting frigates. It was like the war-machine of the Chiss factories had yet to turn itself off.

And of course, with more ships, several vocal Ascendancy leaders had begun advocating that their Expansionary Fleets be used for just that purpose, expanding the territory held by the Chiss.

At times Jagged felt as if he was Assistant Syndic in title only. Not only was he human, but he was also fairly young in the eyes of the senior commanders. Though he would toe the party line and continue to be loyal to the Ascendancy, it did not take a Jedi to see that something was amiss.

Jag hit a button on his desk to secure the room from any form of electronic listening devices. A second button and, the grey-eyed James,

his invaluable aide, independent Force user and boyfriend to his sister, entered his office a few seconds later.
"You called, Assistant Syndic Fel?"
"How would you feel about a prolonged vacation on Csilla?" Jag said calmly.
"I would appreciate any opportunity I have to see Lady Fel," James replied politely.
"That will be your cover story," Jag nodded once. "Something is off with High Command and the way our leaders have been operating these past few years. We made the mistake of blindly trusting our superiors during the Yuuzhan Vong War, and I will not make the same mistake. Go to Csilla, to the capital, and report only to me."
"And who will provide for your security, Assistant Syndic? Wynssa will be more than cross with me if I should leave you unprotected."
"Colonel Irolia and what is left of the House Phalanx will fill in that role. I am also secure in the knowledge that at least half of the Chiss Expansionary Fleet will follow my commands."
"And the other half?"
"Let us hope it does not come to that."
"Why didn't you tell Jaina and the Galactic Alliance commission that was here earlier?"
"Chiss politics is more than dangerous in this day and age," Jag said in a low voice. "I won't drag her into undue danger based on hunches and feelings. Something is amiss with High Command and they'll let their guard down even further if they think they're free of outside scrutiny."
"What do you think I will find on Csilla?"
"In a word? Trouble."
(End)

Anakin
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The journey through the void between galaxies was a long one, a difficult one that even the most experienced spacers would have trouble with. Hyperspace lanes were nearly non-existent, and those that did exist were prone to collapse without warning. With the many trillions in the galaxy still wanting revenge, this void was also a natural defense for the Yuuzhan Vong and Zonama Sekot. Yuuzhan Vong transports and supply ships were only able to traverse the void because of routes embedded in the living ships' memories. It was not saying that travel was impossible, just highly un-recommended and near-suicidal without a proper guide.

The trip was nearly a month in length, even in a fast hybrid ship like the *Veila;* which allowed the *Veila*'s occupants plenty of time of reflection. It was also a daring adventure for the two young girls aboard. They had only heard of the galaxy their parents had called home through stories and holo-recordings, could only imagine what life would be like in that swirling blue mass in the night's sky. Despite the fact that the *Veila* was relatively cramped for two children used to running through the vast fields of people-high grass and lambent fields, they were kept more than occupied by both Tekli and Danni. The former, when not helping Tahiri care for the newborn Jayce, passed down kid-tailored lessons on the shaping and healing arts to Cassa and Jedis'sei. The latter filled in for Shaeri and acted as their teacher for all things teachable. 'Nights' were reserved for cuddling, Jedi lessons, and playtime, in no particular order.

Tucking in the two young girls for the end of another 'day,' a time unit the *Veila* helped with by dimming the lights within the ship at appropriate intervals, the young parents let the membrane door slide shut.

"We're almost there," Anakin murmured, wrapping his arms around his wife. "Two more weeks."

"Nervous, Anakin?"

"Yeah," Anakin breathed. "I have to be insane, dragging all of you back there and..."

Tahiri placed a finger over his lips. "You're not dragging us anywhere, Hero Boy. Did you really think I'd let you face that big scary galaxy all on your own? You're mine, and Cassa's, and Jayce's. And we'll face everything as a family, just like you used to do with Jaina and Jacen and your parents." She leaned into him, resting her head against his broad chest. "I'm right where I want to be, Solo. And I'm not going anywhere, ever."

Anakin sighed softly, burying his nose into her hair and hugging her tightly. "You really are amazing, you know that, right?"

"Of course, you tell me that every day you can," Tahiri murmured contently.

"And you know that I love you?"

Tahiri made a small nod against his chest as he gently rubbed her back. "Feeling very loved. Always do in your arms, Anakin."

Someone clearing their throat almost delicately caused both parents to glance at the source.

"Forgive the interruption," Tekli said contritely. "But I must talk to you about something my studies have uncovered."

"Studies?" Tahiri spun around so that her back was pressed against Anakin.
"Yes," Tekli held up a small qahsa. "I was concerned about what effects leaving Zonama Sekot's sizable Force-presence would have on the little ones. As you know, most Sekotian life begins to die almost immediately if away from the planet for too long. It is why Sekotian ships were only useful for local travel."
"Go on," Anakin said. Tekli didn't sound fearful or worried, but then again, Tekli was an experienced healer, capable of keeping her patients very calm even when delivering the worst of news. "Are you saying that there has been some sort of negative reaction from Cassa, Jedis'sei and Jayce?"
"Not so much with Jayce, and I wouldn't exactly call it a 'negative' reaction," Tekli led Anakin and Tahiri into the main chamber and they all took a seat on the comfortable couches that ringed the room. "As you know, a part of the Sekotian life is bonded to Zonama Sekot herself through the Force. It is that Force bond which allows the ships to find their way back, which allowed the Yuuzhan Vong to continue to find Sekot even if they didn't realize they were searching for it. Both Cassa and Jedis'sei have a similar bond to the planet. Both were born into a world where every cell was literally infused with Force energy. It is why they have always been so powerful and adept at manipulating the Force, manipulating even the Yuuzhan Vong through the Force, despite their young ages."
"As we grew further out from Zonama Sekot, I noticed that they've become a little more quiet, more withdrawn," Anakin said worriedly. "I just thought that they were homesick or apprehensive about the new galaxy we're approaching."
"Those conditions probably factor in as well," Tekli nodded patiently. "But the primary cause is that they feel their link to Sekot dimming. It will not be a fatal reaction, like normal Sekotian life, but more as if they had lost their safety-blanket or stuffed toy. They will both thrive and be stronger in a place with powerful in the Force, so Ossus should help to make them feel better. But in places relatively absent in the Force, such as this void between galaxies…"
"They'll probably have the same Force abilities as me," Danni Quee joined in. "Sorry I was late, those two left the grutchin pen open and I had to herd those little things back in. Anyways, the little ones are like sponges when it comes to the Force. They can soak it up and use their surroundings to their advantage, but if there's nothing to soak up, they'll be nothing for them to use. You guys probably realized how

much easier it was to connect to the Force, to use the Force, on Zonama, than most anywhere else in the galaxy, right?"
Tahiri nodded. "I always thought it was because we were at peace, no running for our lives or ships shooting at us."
"I'm just hypothesizing here, but a part of that ease was due to the high amount of Force energies on that planet. The best equivalent I can think of is that the kiddos have been bouncing around on a low-grav planet and are suddenly being subjected to gravitational forces several times what they're used to. Both are naturally strong in the Force, but never have had to use their own potential because they were always drawing on what Sekot offered them."
"So you're saying that they'll basically have to learn how to use the Force all over again?" Anakin asked.
"Should be easy given their young ages, but yes," Tekli confirmed. "Even I have taken to reviewing the lessons Master Cilghal once taught me. Without Sekot bolstering my own abilities, some of the healing techniques I developed won't work quite as I had intended."
"That's strange, how come we haven't felt anything off?" Tahiri tilted her head.
"You're seriously asking that?" Danni said with a raised eyebrow.
"Yes?" Tahiri was confused by the amusement flowing from the blond scientist.
"Tahiri," Danni said patiently, as if explaining things to a little girl. "You and Anakin are powerful enough without Sekot. Especially with the bond you share. You probably didn't realize any difference because your bond allows the both of you to stay at unfairly high levels of Force potential."
Tekli did a Chadra Fan's best approximation of a smile. "That bond is also what's probably sustaining Cassa, and by extension, Jedis'sei as we travel this void. Otherwise they shouldn't be able to use the Force at all. I am not sure of the repercussions as I have yet to encounter a similar case, but if you could dim the bond between yourself and your daughter when teaching her Jedi abilities, you might slowly force her to draw upon her own potential instead of yours."
"We'll try that next lesson," Tahiri said. "Thanks Tekli, Danni."
"Really paid off to travel with two of the smartest doctors in the galaxy," Anakin chimed, likewise indicating his gratefulness.
"Please, your charm is wasted on us," Tekli mock scoffed. "I know full well just how skilled I am. You would have been a fool not to take Danni and I."
"I think your deification has made you touched by Rhysode," Tahiri giggled.

"Yes, Yun-Tekli. Don't forget you're a minor goddess subordinate to Yun-Ne'shel," Danni poked fun.
"I'm still divine," Tekli tilted her head up and held the position for a long second, before breaking down and laughing. "Force, you all have been a bad influence on me."
"Hey, they dedicate the first Yuuzhan Vong hospital to you. Even invented the Yuuzhan Vong word and concept for 'hospital' just for that occasion," Tahiri beamed, leaning into her husband. "You have a right to enjoy your godliness."
"For now."
"Don't worry Danni. I'm sure you'll become a minor god too. The crazy scientist who blends Yun-Ne'shel's work with inanimate metals and tech," Anakin said consoling.
"Great, that'd be the pinnacle of my career, to be called a goddess," Danni deadpanned.
"See, we made the right decision, tagging along with the Avatars of *Yun-Ne'shel* and *Yun-Shuno*," Tekli chimed in, her Yuuzhan Vong pronunciation of the two names flawless.
Tahiri exhaled. "It really was a relief when they stopped calling us that for those public ceremonies. Still a shame they wouldn't stop bowing low every time Cassa passed them."
"I wonder how the Yuuzhan Vong in the galaxy will react to you guys' return," Danni said soberly. "I mean, it's been seven years since *they* have seen the rest of their people. Sure the Supreme Council keeps tabs on them, but most of them are more used to following Galactic Alliance law and whatever cultures they settled around than Yuuzhan Vong."
"That reminds me," Anakin gestured to the room's qahsa. "Did you see the report about the Yuuzhan Vong who stayed behind on Mandalore?"
"No," Danni replied, shaking her head once. "Must have missed that one."
"Let's just say those Death Watch guys have an all-Yuuzhan Vong unit working with them," Anakin said.
"Yuuzhan Vong in those suits of armor," Danni shuddered. "They were scary enough with the vonduun shells, no need to add flamethrowers and missile launchers."
"They managed to get over the blasphemy of using metal technology?" Tekli said curiously.
"The way the report read, they figured that if they get their butts kicked by a force many times smaller than their own, then the gods really didn't care what happens to Yuuzhan Vong. From what I could

gather, most of those who joined the Death Watch had a crisis of faith and decided that the gods must not exist after all."
"I definitely hope the Mandos stay on our side then," Tahiri shook her head. "I fought with them and they were scary good. Who knows how much better they'll be after absorbing the best aspects of Yuuzhan Vong culture and practices?"
"Wait, the Yuuzhan Vong only joined Death Watch?" Danni said, her mind reviewing the information.
"Yes. For some reason, they didn't get involved with the supercommandos or the rest of the Mandalorian groups."
"Strange. The Death Watch were all for pure Mandalorian culture…why would they…?" Danni scratched her head. "The galaxy must really have changed."
"Seven years *is* a long time to be away," Tekli commented softly. "I wonder how Master Cilghal is doing."
"Wonder if the galaxy got any better or learned anything from the war," Danni echoed.
The quartet fell silent, their musings getting the better of them. They knew first hand, from working with the Yuuzhan Vong, just how much could change in so little an amount of time. Knew that governments had formed and collapsed in an even shorter period. They thought of their friends, their families, acquaintances left behind. Where would all of them be now? How were they doing?
"Eager to see the rest of your family again, Anakin?" Danni asked gently.
"Something like that," Anakin whispered, looking away. "We weren't exactly a regular family in any way. Mom and dad raised us, if you could say that, to be independent. We learned pretty quickly that neither of them had the power to protect us from those shadows in the night, were not all knowing or perfect. I was never too close to Jacen, regardless of how many times we came to agree to disagree. During the war, he internalized everything, rarely letting those close to him in. And Jaya, she's always marched to the beat of her own drum, and then ran if feelings got in the way of that beat. Jace tried to bury his feelings, she ran away from them. And mom and dad just trusted us all to survive regardless of how many near-death experiences we faced. Sure I love them all, am grateful for them. But miss them? I don't know. I mean, now I have Tahiri, Cassa, and Jayce now, had a life that didn't involve killing, running, and solving problems leading to certain death for one party or another. A life separate and away from Jaina, Jace, mom, and dad. Would that life still be possible if I had stayed in the galaxy? Stayed close to them? It doesn't matter now anyways. I'll

take things as they come, but I don't really have any expectations one way or another."
"I have tried telling him that he's lucky enough to have a brother, sister, mother, and father who are all alive after a war that killed trillions. Especially since they were all on the front lines," Tahiri added, subdued yet sounding mildly annoyed at the same time. "Even tried to get this dummy to visit them on more than one occasion. But every time I'd convince him to, some other problem would pop up for Taan and the others and we'd have to cancel. Then, when the crisis was over, he'd argue that it was better we stayed."
"Well, you've gotten your wish anyways," Anakin said. "We're going back, this time *because* of some problem that popped up for Taan."
"The Force really does have a warped sense of humor," Tahiri agreed wryly. "Let's hope its humor doesn't continue to when we drop out of hyperspace. For all we know we'll be walking into a galactic civil war and a failed government, in addition to our Bothan problem."
"Way to think positive, Tahiri," Danni breathed in exasperation. "Stop hanging around your husband."
"Hey, I was thinking positive."
"See the second half of my statement," Danni retorted.
"Well, we won't be in range of the nearest HoloNet buoy for at least another week, so no new news until then," Tekli commented. "We'll have to rely on those three-month old reports from the last convoy that returned."
"Right, like the galaxy will change any more in those three months," Anakin said sarcastically.
"I hate traveling with you two, you know that?" Danni sighed.
"What? Is the girl who believes in all things science-y, superstitious?" Anakin raised an eyebrow.
"Hey I believe in the Force, and for some reason, things *always* become a bigger problem than it was when you two get involved."
"Not true!"
"Case in point, during the war. You went to Yavin Four to rescue Tahiri and the other Jedi there from the Yuuzhan Vong attack. Ended up creating a counter-culture that grew into a full-fledged resistant movement that changed the tide of the war," Danni said flatly.
"Or that time shortly after the war's end; the two of you were investigating the group of warriors who refused to lay down their arms." Tekli spoke in a similarly clinically dry tone. "They turned out to be a large sect of Shimrra followers, who eventually became the Shimrraists."

"Or the time you called in Tekli to investigate flu-like symptoms in one of the villages."
"And it turned out to be a highly contagious and lethal virus that spread to thirteen-percent of the entire population of Yuuzhan Vong," Tekli finished dully.
"Or the time you were celebrating his birthday," Danni began.
"And ended up getting pregnant with Cassa?" Tekli deadpanned
"All right! All right, we get the idea," Anakin and Tahiri beamed at each other with silly grins. "Maybe the Force just likes us or something."
Danni and Tekli exchanged incredulous glances, and as one, turned to the young couple. After a measured beat, in their driest of tones, they said in unison. "Anakin, Tahiri, with you two, it's definitely 'or something.'"
}-(II)-{ }-(II)-{
"Attention passenger-peoples, we will be re-entering the galaxy in five, four, three, two, one," the *Veila* announced cheerily over the intercom. The ship's inertial dampeners and dovin basal prevented the crew from feeling the reversion, but the star-spangled view outside the few windows gave testament to the fact that they were no longer in the cold void between galaxies or in the blue tunnel of hyperspace. *"Those who want to see something more than black matter can now put on cognition hoods or stare out the nearest viewport. I will be maintaining this position for the next ten minutes to re-chart hyperspace lanes and plot our next jump."*
Both Cassa and Jedis'sei, who had been playing a memory game with Danni in the central room, perked up at the announcement and twisted around excitedly towards Anakin and Tahiri.
"Use the cognition hoods, you'll get a better view," Anakin advised with a broad grin, an arm around his smiling wife.
The two little girls quickly abandoned their position by the dejarik board and crawled into the large nooks. Once comfy, they crammed a cognition hood over their small heads. They were soon completely immersed in their first 'up-close' look of a galaxy they had only seen in the skies of Zonama Sekot.
"There's so many stars," Jedis'sei said wonderingly.
"They're everywhere," Cassa agreed, twisting herself left and right in the chair to change the angle she was viewing.
"Oooo, look! Over there. That's a nebula, right?!" Jedis'sei momentarily looked over her shoulder for confirmation as she pointed out a cloud of blue and purple off in the distance.

"And over there! That sun is red!" It was a unique sight to the girls used to feeling the warmth of the two yellow suns that warmed Zonama.
"*Veila,* how long until we reach Ossus?" Tahiri asked.
"Using the most direct hyperspace route, we are approximately three days out. We have emerged on the Triellus Trade Route, several dozen parsecs away from the Rinn system. Would you like me to tap into the local HoloNet to get an update on the news?"
"You'd do it anyways," Danni called out teasingly, looking up from the datapad she was reading. The light fixture above her suddenly dimmed, and the cooling unit next to it went on at full blast. "Hey! Nothing wrong about being curious."
"Anything interesting, or more of the same?" Tekli sighed.
"*Scanning, one moment please,"* the slightly more mature voice of the *Veila*'s thinking personality chimed. As if powered by a real brain, the *Veila*'s mind was separated into two pieces. There was the logical, computational half in the form of a specially designed droid brain, and the more creative, emotional side in the form of a Yuuzhan Vong ship-mind. The *Veila*'s personality used both 'sides' to process the emotional and logical problems it encountered. For great influxes of data, or powerful emotional moments, one side or the other took over completely. It was still the *Veila*, just a *Veila* focused on one specific task. *"There is one event of note. From two hours ago, feeds from the Bothawui system suggest a major development in galactic politics."*
"I thought Bothawui was in the Mid Rim," Danni blinked. "Aren't we still in the Outer Rim?"
"My apologies. I meant feeds from Bothan colonies established in what was once demarcated as Hutt Space. HoloNet receivers are beaming a broadcast across all Bothan claimed space, and as we are near Hutt Space, we are capable of receiving the broadcast."
"Put it on the main projector," Tahiri directed.
An image of the Bothan ruling body, the Combined Clans, and their meeting chamber appeared over the holoprojector in the middle of the room. Nearly a thousand Bothans filled the chamber, their fur and distinguishing markings varying from clan to clan. A lone Bothan with crisply pressed clothing and immaculately combed fur, stood at a central dais, gazing up at the crowd.
"*Bothans!"* Despite his apparent age, his deep voice carried power, strength, and an undeniable charisma. "*The time has come for all of us to choose! Are we to stay true to what it means to be Bothan? Stay true to The Way and the superiority of our race? Or are we to accept a pale imitation of victory, accept that our ar'krai end with our enemies*

still breathing? Are we to become the working dogs of the Galactic Alliance? Sacrificing our ships and resources for one ill-fated venture after another. Or are we to rise up and carve out our own destiny in this galaxy? The Way states that the Bothans should be above all other races, equal to no one. I look at our great people today and weep. How does Bothawui benefit by bleeding credits to a government that can't even control its own people? What is the benefit for us by staying with the Galactic Alliance, when we can easily care for all our clans without them? What does it mean to be Bothan today if we're giving away our livelihood for nothing in return? It is time, time to decide whether or not to stay with the Galactic Alliance and the inept leadership that guides them to ruin. I say that it is also time to remember what it is to be Bothan, to be the best race in this galaxy!"

Applause was picked up by the holo-cameras recording the event, nearly all the room standing at the male Bothan's speech. The Bothan smirked at the crowd and bowed his head in a show of humility, before leaving the dais and taking his seat. In his place, a female Bothan stepped forward, her clothing appearing to indicate that she was not quite as well off as her predecessor.

"The floor recognizes Clan Leader Asyr Sei'lar and will hear her rebuttal to the words of the True Victory party."

Asyr didn't take the dais, but instead began to pace around it, glaring up at the crowd with baleful violet eyes. *"I cannot believe that the Bothans are so stupid as to fall for pretty words. Have we not learned our lessons from the Yuuzhan Vong War? Have we not seen where that type of thinking will get us? The hubris of the Bothan race will be our downfall, just as it was the downfall of the Hutts, the Yuuzhan Vong, and the Empire before us. We cannot close our doors to the rest of the galaxy, or use our resources to lord over those less fortunate than us. I take pride in calling myself Bothan, but if we vote to continue this genocidal war, to separate from the Galactic Alliance, I will seriously question our ability to think about the long-term well-being of our people. You all saw it during the war. The Yuuzhan Vong picked off those who were isolated, who believed themselves to be better than everyone else. The Yuuzhan Vong came, and no one answered the cries for help that soon followed. We are setting ourselves up to become targets."*

"Targets of the envy and greed of the lesser races," the older Bothan who had spoken before her scoffed. "There is no other fleet in this galaxy capable of matching our armada of assault cruisers. Even the Galactic Alliance's fleets are spread thin across this galaxy. Why should

we help others if we can use this opportunity to increase the influence and power of Bothawui?"
"Elders, I believe the True Victory emissary has already had his allotted time," Asyr said with a hint of venom in her voice.
"The emissary for the True Victory party will refrain from further interruptions."
"As I was saying. We are setting ourselves up to be targets. This galaxy is a big place, a lonely place to those who do not have friends. Even if Bothawui were to construct our own treaties with other governments, anyone of note is still a part of the Galactic Alliance. What does it mean to be a Bothan? There is The Way, of course. But even tradition can be flawed. How many clans and family members turned on each other all in the name of success and power? How many Bothans have died at the hands of another Bothan because they followed The Way? If we continue ar'krai, I can guarantee that it will be our race that is wiped out. I beg of all of you, on behalf of our people, do what you think is right and best for our people. I have said my part and only time will tell if we Bothans can truly learn from our mistakes. That is all."
Asyr returned to her seat in deafening silence, not a whisper could be heard in the room. A group of older Bothans rose from their seats. *"We will now take a vote. To secede from the Galactic Alliance, more than seventy percent of Bothans everywhere must agree. So those on Bothawui, on our far-flung colonies, in ships throughout the galaxy, we say to you now, vote. Vote for the future of Bothawui, vote on the future of the Bothan race."*
The *Veila* minimized the rest of the broadcast, allowing those who had watched it time to gather their thoughts.
"*Veila*, what do you have on this 'True Victory' party?" Danni asked.
"According to their HoloNet site, the True Victory party is a right-wing political party made up of a conglomerate of peoples and businesses who are not satisfied on how the Yuuzhan Vong War was ended. Though the extent the group will go to vary from region to region, they believe that the Yuuzhan Vong escaped adequate punishment at the end of the war. There are True Victory affiliates scattered mostly through Outer Rim and Mid Rim worlds heavily damaged by the warring. In relation to the Bothans, it could be argued that Bothawui is the birth place of the True Victory movement. They represent the most extreme view of the pan-galactic political party in that they wish to continue ar'krai down to the very last Yuuzhan Vong, regardless of what it will cost them. The current leader of the Bothan True Victory party is Bothan Senator Reh'mwa, a man with great support from

traditionalists and those hurt greatly by the war and its consequences. I have sent the rest of the information to your datapads."
"Great, nothing like cultural obligations to condone a genocide," Danni groaned.
"Or angering a people who have been allies to the Galactic Alliance since it was in its Rebel Alliance days," Tekli added with closed eyes. She stood from her chair. "For Force sake I'm a doctor, not a politician. Tahiri, would you mind if I looked after Jayce for a little bit? Human biology is much less complicated than matters of galactic politics."
"Go ahead," Tahiri laughed. "Can't fix political problems with bandages and bacta."
"If it were that easy, the galaxy wouldn't need the two of you," Tekli joked, shaking her head. "By the way, *Veila,* hasn't ten minutes elapsed by now? Shouldn't we be on our way?"
"I was staying in regular space so the little people would focus on the stars and planets, and not on the adult conversations you big people are having," The *Veila* replied, her 'emotional' mind once again taking control. The group glanced at where Cassa and Jedis'sei were still engrossed in the sights they were seeing through the cognition hoods. The *Veila* was evidently having a conversation with them through the hood, evoking giggles, 'ooohs' and 'ahhhs' at appropriate intervals.
"They can worry about saving the galaxy when they're older."
"Thanks *Veila*," Tahiri said sincerely, resting a hand on the organic wall of the hybrid-ship.
"*Veila*, you said that the broadcast was two hours old. Do we know the result of the vote?" Anakin asked.
"Yes. The Bothans voted to secede from the Galactic Alliance as of thirty minutes ago. The corresponding declaration was just made in the Galactic Alliance Senate, making it official."
"It's beginning to look more and more like the entire Bothan government was behind the attack on Zonama Sekot," Tahiri said darkly.
"Being the relative newcomers to this galaxy, we're going to have to figure out a lot more before we can move against them though," Anakin reasoned. "The Bothans were always a political heavy-weight, and I doubt they'd sever *all* ties."
"Then the sooner we get to Ossus the better," Danni concluded. "The masters there can fill us in on what we have to do to avert a second Yuuzhan Vong War."
}-(III)-{ }-(III)-{
After a solemn three days of hyperspace travel, the crew of the *Veila* felt their spirits lifted as they emerged into the Adega system. Wanting

to be silly, if only for a little bit, the crew opted for a rather fun-filled re-entry to Ossus. The occupants of the *Veila* studiously minimized their Force presences as the world of Ossus took shape, exchanging mischievous grins as they did so. After all, who wouldn't pass up a chance to play a prank on their old teachers?

"Now entering the Adega system, home system to the planet Ossus," the *Veila* announced cheerily. *"If you'll look out the viewport you can see Adega Prime and Adega Besh. Sunshields are raised so it's safe to look at the suns directly."*

"Ooo, this system has two suns, just like home!" Cassa smiled eagerly at her parents.

Like a tour guide, the *Veila* began to go into an informational spiel about the Adega system and angled them towards Ossus in a lazy arc.

"Receiving transmission from Ossus," Danni called out mirthfully from the cockpit. "Anakin, Tahiri, either of you want to take it?"

"I'll look after the little ones," Tekli said, a smile of her own appearing as she once again detected presences she hadn't felt for seven years.

The young couple left the central room and joined Danni.

"They don't recognize us yet?" Anakin said with his father's trademark smirk. He could feel both Kam and Tionne reach out towards them in an attempt to discern their intentions.

"Nope," Danni settled into the passenger seat and let Tahiri take her place.

Tahiri flicked a switch, and the stern voice of Kyp Durron filled the room. *"Repeat, unidentified Yuuzhan Vong vessel. This is the Ossus Praxeum. State your domain and purpose immediately."*

"How rude, I'm not a Yuuzhan Vong vessel," the *Veila* protested to its occupants. *"I'm a one-of-a-kind, advanced, hybrid ship."*

"It's okay, *Veila*. Master Durron doesn't know any better," Anakin sympathized. "You can scold and educate him about the many differences once we land."

Smiling wryly, Tahiri activated the comm-unit. "Hello Master Durron. This is Tahiri Solo in the *Veila*, requesting permission to land."

The stunned silence felt by the crew of the *Veila* had them grin to one and other. Seconds passed, and the planet of Ossus loomed ever larger before them. Eventually, it was not Kyp who replied, but Jedi Master Kam Solusar.

"*Welcome back, Tahiri, Anakin,"* Kam sounded both genuinely glad to hear them, but also genuinely sarcastic at the same time. *"You'll excuse the delay but Kyp was recruited by my wife to gather up the students, and they're currently rushing to the landing pad. Please warn me before you make my wife shriek in joy like that again."*

"Will do, Master Solusar," Tahiri giggled.
"So I take it we have permission to land then," Anakin couldn't help but chuckle.
"Of course, Anakin. Bad timing though, you just missed the Masters Skywalker and your parents. They left for Hapes two days ago."
"Oh?"
"Not sure if you heard, but the Queen Mother of the Hapan Consortium is giving birth to her first child. Your parents and aunt and uncle won't be back for at least a couple of weeks, and I have a feeling you haven't decided to just drop in for a social visit."
"We'll explain more when we land," Anakin sobered. "But you're right, I don't think we'll be able to stick around and wait for their return."
"If my wife has her way, you'll definitely be staying for a few days though," Kam said dryly. *"So, who else do you have up there with you? I recognize Tekli and Danni, but there are three others…two seem oddly familiar but…"*
"Well Master Solusar," Tahiri took over playfully. "You'll just have to join Tionne and Master Durron on the landing pad, won't you?"
"You haven't even landed yet, why I am now dreading your return?"
"Please excuse these crazy Jedi," Danni said drolly, glaring at the young couple. "They're blissfully in love and still like to drag everyone around them into the many schemes of theirs."
"Good to hear you too, Danni. Alright, Mrs. Solo. I'll see you all at the landing pad. Ossus Control, out."
Patting Danni's arm fondly, both Anakin and Tahiri moved back towards the central chamber. Tahiri gently took Jayce into her arms to feed him, while Anakin plopped Cassa onto his lap. The youngest blond girl in the ship still had her head buried in the cognition hood, absorbing everything her young mind could register.
The sky above the Ossus Praxeum was a dazzling blue, cloudless and bright. The glowing light of the binary stars reflected off the wave-like curves of the gleaming white arches of the praxeum like a shining beacon. A small oasis of trees, flowering plants, and grass ringed the praxeum, the blooming life made all the more apparent by the rocky landscape that surrounded the patch of green and brown.
The air was calm as the *Veila* pushed through the upper atmosphere, the planet enfolding the hybrid vessel in a pleasant and eventless welcome.
"Ossus is so warm," Cassa cooed, her eyes squeezing shut and a wide smile appearing on her face. After traveling for so long in the void of space, to feel a planet so strong in the Force was a welcomed change.

Anakin affectionately rubbed her back as he felt her tap into the Force presence of Ossus. Her own Force presence went from a flickering flame to a roaring fireplace in a heartbeat; her joy and happiness at finding the warmth of the planet felt clearly not just by those in the ship but those on the ground below as well. "Control, Cassa," Anakin coached tenderly. "Your mom and I are glad you're so happy, but you don't need to broadcast it so strongly."
Cassa, head still in the overly large cognition hood, looked over her shoulder, seeing her father only through the Force. With a single nod, the Force energy she was emitting was pulled back into her small form; a seemingly impossible feat given how much energy she had been emitting.
"Are all the people down there Jedi?" Jedis'sei asked, tugging on one of Anakin's sleeves.
"Most of them," Anakin nodded. Without needing to touch his lambent saber, he closed his eyes for a moment. "I think there are about a dozen or so Yuuzhan Vong down there too."
"Fourteen, daddy," Cassa supplied, her cognition hood-covered head turning this way and that as she continued to use the ship's senses to scan the planet in conjunction with her own unique Force abilities.
"Fourteen it is," Anakin said, sharing a smile with Tahiri. "Can you tell which Domain?"
"We're still too high up," Cassa shook her head. She stopped when the *Veila* deliberately increased their downward velocity. "Oh, thanks *Veila.* Let's see, Domain Phaath. No, Hool. Wait, Yim. It has to be Yim. They have the same markings as Master Shaper Nen Yim."
"Absolutely sure?" Anakin said with amusement.
"Absolutely sure." Cassa then seemed to have a thought and frowned. She took off the cognition hood and looked over to Tahiri. "Mommy, these shapers won't act weird and bow to me like the others on Zonama, will they?"
"To be honest, I'm not sure," Tahiri replied tenderly. "The Yuuzhan Vong who stayed behind in this galaxy are a lot less traditional than those that lived with us. Since they're from Domain Yim, they should listen to you once you tell them not to bow or call you a goddess."
"Oh, okay," Cassa crammed the cognition hood back on her head. Anakin, however, peeled it back off. "Okay, you've let your eyes do the seeing, now see this planet only with the Force. You too, Jedis'sei. We're about to land, so take in everything you can"
Both little girls closed their eyes and attuned themselves to the life forces on the planet before them. Both could sense the many Jedi awaiting them, the trees, birds, small rodents, and more. They could

feel the planet itself, a massive presence compared to their own tiny forms, all around them, warm and welcoming. Jedis'sei and Cassa took the time to send a 'hello' to each of the lives they felt, and being the good big sisters they were, also made sure to share some of the welcoming replies to a sleeping Jayce. They were still in a quasi-trance when the *Veila* finally shuddered as its landing struts made contact with the dirt platform of Ossus' landing pad.

"Time to meet everyone," Anakin whispered, patting the backs of the two little girls.

The blond human and red Twi'lek stirred, sleepily rubbing their eyes as they refocused on their immediate surroundings. With grins directed at Anakin and Tahiri, they leaped off their couches, barely able to contain their excitement. Fortunately, Danni emerged back from the cockpit and joined Tekli in corralling the younger two budding Jedi towards the landing ramp. In the meantime, Anakin draped an arm around Tahiri's waist while she lovingly carried Jayce between the two of them.

"Ready to see Ossus with your own eyes?" Tekli asked Cassa.

"Uh huh," the blond girl nodded. The ramp before them lowered, and a whole new world was revealed to the wide-eyed young five year old.

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Cassa Solo took in the towering hallways of the Ossus Praxeum with the same innocent curiosity she had had on Zonama Sekot. Her mommy and daddy were off with the other adults talking about serious, adult matters. Cassa still didn't know why the two insisted on being silly by trying to shield her from what they were feeling when she could easily sense all of their emotions. She could feel sorrow, surprise, happiness, anger, and a whole host of other feelings she didn't know the names for. But then, as if sensing she was listening in, she felt her mommy's Force presence gently guide her attention back to the present.

With a small pout, Cassa obeyed, but with some amount of apprehension. Though Ossus was warm in the Force and welcoming in general, there were so many differences that reminded her of just how this planet was so unlike home.

Just the buildings alone caused her some trepidation. It had taken some getting used to the fact that the walls were not alive at all, that she couldn't just reach out with the Force and feel its beating presence all around her. Instead of the usual coral and Sekotian life that she had grown up with, the walls were a cold, unfeeling metal that had her looking askance as she ran her hands along its many surfaces. Sure on Zonama, she had seen prefab shelters brought in by the aid groups,

but those had been tiny domes made of flimsy cloth-like materials. The praxeum around her was many, many, many times bigger.
Even more were the equally lifeless droids that roamed the halls, carrying about one duty or another. Yellow optical sensors and expressionless faces of protocol droids had scared her, as had her inability to feel anything remotely living about them.
Fortunately, she wasn't alone. She was traveling with Jedis'sei and a group of the other Jedi children led by a nine-year old girl named Cappricia. Next to them, a Jedi girl around her age, Ryza Durron, would explain one thing or another in a hushed voice.
"And these are the kitchens," Ryza continued on, seemingly unaware of just how distracted Cassa was. "For smaller meals the Masters Solusar cook it for us. But if everyone's here, we have Cookie and his helpers make it." She gestured to several culinary droids going about preparing lunch. The droids were slender metal pillars on tread-like wheels with multiple arms emerging from the pillars at different angles. Each arm was going about a different task, cooking eggs, flipping meats, timing bread in an oven; and one even waved at her. For Cassa, it seemed extremely unnerving to see these headless limbs twirl about, and she involuntarily gripped Jedis'sei's hand just a bit tighter.
"Can we go outside?" Cassa asked in a whisper, eyeing the cooking droids with distrust.
"Okay, I'll ask Ricia," Ryza nodded, and she promptly pushed her way through the small group of young Jedi in training to get to the Melodie initiate.
The 'tour' took a detour out a side door, and once she was in the bright rays of Ossus' two suns, Cassa managed to take a small breath of relief. From the matching sigh emitted by Jedis'sei, she knew that she hadn't been the only one scared of the lifeless machines.
Finding the fresh air and abundance of life in the surrounding greenery relaxing, Cassa allowed a hesitant smile to appear on her face. Jedis'sei matched her expression and the two couldn't help but giggle. They knew they were being completely ridiculous. How in the world could they be in any danger at a school for other Jedi? After all, the others seemed to be just fine, so there couldn't possibly be anything wrong with the droids that roamed the hallways and rooms.
"Are you okay?" Cappricia asked, moving to the two younger ones and trying to assess them with the Force.
"We'll be fine," Cassa nodded in turn. "We just needed some fresh air."

"Well," Cappricia looked slightly lost. "Is there any part of the praxeum that you want to see? If I get Master Sitra's permission, we can go to the Old Jedi Library."
Cassa shook her head, casting about for an answer of her own. It came to her when she saw one of the Yuuzhan Vong shapers in the distance. The Yuuzhan Vong was surrounded by flowering bushes and was in the process of planting another one. Brightening, she looked to Cappricia with an eager grin. "Can we go talk to the Yuuzhan Vong?"
"Why do you want to do that?" One of the other children said in a combination of revulsion and horror.
Cassa's smile faltered. "Why not?"
"They're scary," another one of the children said softly.
"My daddy said their people killed many people," Jesmin Sarkin-Tainer, another young initiate, added almost fearfully.
"Plus they're all weird in the Force, like emptiness."
Cassa blinked repeatedly, feeling tears well up in her eyes. Between the strange metal building and the odd planet and people, she had had enough. She stomped her foot once and tilted her chin in the air. "Well Jedis'sei and I can sense them just fine! It's all of you who are weird and strange!"
Tugging on Jedis'sei's hand, Cassa broke away from the rest of the Jedi children and towards the one thing that seemed familiar to her. Why couldn't they sense the Yuuzhan Vong? It was so easy for her. They were like glimmering lanterns in the Force, different than other species, yet so obviously present.
She was half way to the Yuuzhan Vong shaper when she realized that several of the children were following her. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Cappricia, a red-haired human boy, and a slightly older than her cat-like boy, walking quickly to catch up. After a brief moment of confusion, Cassa recalled that the cat-like people were called 'Cathar'. Exchanging a shrug with Jedis'sei, Cassa was about to continue her fast sprint away from the rest of the Jedi children, when her pursuers began to call out.
"Wait!" The red-haired boy called out.
"Wait for us!" The Cathar added.
Cassa and Jedis'sei waited for the trio to catch up.
"Why?" Cassa pouted, folding her small arms in front of her chest as she glowered at the trio. "Going to be mean to the Yuuzhan Vong some more?"
"No," the red-haired boy shook his head. He looked like he was eight or nine, but Cassa couldn't really tell. Everyone older than her just looked bigger. "We don't all hate them. Hi, I'm Josat. My mom and dad work

with Yuuzhan Vong to make planets safe again. I thought I was the only person who thought they were okay people."
"And I'm Jun, Jun Rasi Tuum," the Cathar boy said in a friendly, out-of-breath growl. "Josat's friend."
"Are you okay?" Jedis'sei asked, frowning as Jun continued to breath heavily.
The young Cathar nodded. "My home got Vong-shaped when I was in my mom's tummy. My lungs never fully developed. The shapers here are working on a way to fix them, but they said that I'd have to wait until I grew older before they could completely make me better."
"Oh, okay," Cassa said, not quite understanding but not wanting to look stupid in front of the bigger kids.
"Yeah, I was the lucky one, being born with the Force," Jun said, getting his breathing under control. "The rest of my littermates all died as babies."
Cassa blinked slowly. Then nodded and made a decision. "Okay, you can come with Jedis'sei and I."
The young blond girl and the Twi'lek then looked to the Melodie, as if asking 'what's your story?' The rest of the Jedi children had disappeared back into the praxeum, too scared to be near a Yuuzhan Vong.
But the young Melodie was not like the rest. Meeting Cassa and Jedis'sei's distrusting stares, Cappricia didn't respond to them, but instead walked right past them to the shaper behind them. The Yuuzhan Vong had been watching the exchange in silent amusement, his face becoming emotionless as all eyes turned towards him.
"Hi! Is that the flower bush you told me about yesterday? Is it doing well?" Cappricia said conversationally. "You said that it was going to be different colors under different types of light, right?"
The shaper nodded mutely and produced a small light fixture from one of the pouches on his living belt. Waving it over a nearby bush, the gathered children could see the green leaves turn blue under black light, then purple under another spectrum.
"Neat!" Cappricia exclaimed.
Cassa, deciding that the trio that had joined her and Jedis'sei weren't all that bad, bounded up to the shaper. "*Nikk pryozz Cassa Solo! Ne pryozz Jedis'sei. Gadma, vong al'Ne-shel. Zhal sos yam?"*
"You can speak their language?" Josat said, awe, not incrimination, in his voice. "Can you teach me?"
Cassa beamed and nodded, looking back to the startled shaper for her answer.

"I can speak the toneless tongue, Solo-child," the shaper said slowly. "And I am doing well, thank you for asking. I can definitely see your mother in you, child. That is a blessing in itself. She-Who-Was-Shaped was a gift from the gods when we most needed one."
"You're not going to bow or anything, are you?" Cassa said warily.
At that, the shaper let out a barking laugh, a grin stretching his skull-like face. "Not unless you command it. Master Shaper Nen Yim has already used the emergency villip to order all of us to treat you like we would any other. The punishment for doing otherwise is most severe."
"Great, then we'll get along just fine," Cassa said with a brilliant smile.
With the introductions over, the shaper soon had his hands full with five inquisitive children. Questions, answers, jokes, all were shared. Some of the other shapers, hearing the light-hearted talk and giggling of children, likewise gravitated over to the small garden. And once more, all was right for the young blond girl.
}-(V)-{ }-(V)-{
Getting caught up on seven years of history in a couple of hours was hard work. Fortunately, Anakin, Tahiri, Danni, and Tekli had remained somewhat informed about the state of the galaxy through HoloNet reports recorded by the supply convoys that made the trek out from Zonama Sekot and back. Even then, it was hard to believe that the galaxy they had left had changed so greatly.
The intricacies of galaxy politics, most of which had been set aside in the face of the threat the Yuuzhan Vong had posed, had returned full force. Some might argue things were even worse than before. It was as if every lesson learned during the war was set aside now that certain annihilation had been avoided; which didn't bode well for anyone. The galaxy was even more divided than before, and in a panic, everyone was turning to their own people to save themselves. The Imperials, Bothans, Corellians, even the Bakurans, were all isolating themselves in an attempt to minimize whatever tidal wave of damage was caused *when* the Galactic Alliance collapsed. Yet, as isolated as they all were, they were still connected in more ways than one, making the current situation one he wouldn't wish on anybody.
And just as the galaxy had changed, not necessarily for the better, so too had the Jedi Order. Luke Skywalker may have been the Grandmaster, but the title had become one of ceremonial importance instead of actually meaning a 'leader' of the Order. And without a clear leader, the Jedi Order was foundering, sorely needing direction. The galaxy was looking to the Order to fix things, but the Order couldn't even help itself as problems and pressures mounted and politics took its toll. Jacen's attempts to change the mindset of the Jedi Order High

Council members had the potential to be very successful, but the galaxy simply did not have that time to spare. Change needed to happen immediately, and change in a direction far opposite of the one both the galaxy and Order were headed.
"Still trying to sort things out," Anakin responded to an unasked question, feeling Tahiri behind him. He was standing on the balcony at the apex of one of the magnificent white arches of the praxeum, just taking in the sweeping view before him. The two suns bombarded the balcony with afternoon light and warmth, but a brisk breeze kept everything bearable. "I asked Kyp and Master Solusar to get me more information on a few things I wanted to look into."
"It's all one giant puzzle for you, isn't it?" Tahiri said wanly, wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing her cheek against his shoulder blade. "A politician here, a solar system or two there, pirates and refugees somewhere in between. All you have to do is organize the pieces."
"Actually, that's the easy part," Anakin brought Tahiri around to his front and gave her a brief kiss. "The hard part is deciding what picture I want as an end result. Scratch that, the hard part is getting everyone on board for the picture I'll create with all the little pieces."
"You'll figure it out somehow," Tahiri said with confidence. "You hate leaving puzzles undone."
Anakin sighed, focusing on the barren mountains in the distance. "I just wonder what Jacen and Jaina are up to though, what they'd think of my little solution. I know I expected it, but it's strange to hear about how spread out my family's become."
"Not so strange," Tahiri said softly. "You were the main thing that held them together. Jaina wanted to protect you above all else, Jacen wanted to compete with you. Mara wanted to train you, Master Skywalker wanted to prepare you. And your mom and dad, well, they were just proud that all three of you were doing well despite everything. With you not in the picture, Jaina had no one to worry about and she went her own way. Jacen could focus on being Jacen instead of being in your shadow. And your mom and dad, with their children so far apart, returned to their saving-the-galaxy selves to distract themselves. But you're back now, so everything's going to change again."
"Is that good or bad?" Anakin joked.
"Can't have one without the other," Tahiri shrugged simply.
"I know we have the Yuuzhan Vong-Bothan crisis to deal with, but we're going to need help," Anakin began hesitantly. "With the galaxy

the way it is now, I can't tug on one strand without unraveling a whole ball of yarn."
"So we'll be staying here for a little bit then?"
"At least until Uncle Luke and Aunt Mara get back. I want to run some ideas by them, understand how *they* see the galaxy as it is. The last time we were here, I planned things, but didn't take the time to truly think about what would happen. I'm a different person now, I won't be making the same mistakes."
Tahiri's eyes opened and closed slowly. "I know you won't. You'll think about the big picture and how this galaxy all fits together. But what about the little picture? How are *we* going to fit, Anakin? Are we going to be staying in this galaxy after this or returning to Zonama Sekot? Be a family or be heroes? My home is where you are, but it won't be fair to Cassa if we keep taking her away from all of her friends and the life she knows. It won't be fair to either Jayce or Cassa if one of us is killed trying to make this galaxy a safer place. Can we truly be a family, still have what we had on Zonama if we're running around the galaxy worrying about whether or not we'll be alive at the end of the next day? We probably should have talked about this before we left Zonama Sekot. But like you, I thought all we'd have to do is come here, straighten out a few things and return. If we step into the spotlight again, we'll have a very hard time stepping out of it, and Cassa and Jayce will become targets. Just like what it was for you and your siblings and parents."
Anakin released a long breath, trying to focus on the distant peaks of barren mountains. He knew Tahiri was right. But their only other option was hide somewhere and hope everything passed them by. If they did nothing, the Yuuzhan Vong would return looking for vengeance, and war would be unavoidable. But if they got involved in the galactic politics again, their lives, the lives of their children, could never be the same. Neither choice was palatable. He was no longer making decisions for himself, but for his family as well. A family he wanted to protect from everything he had had to go through as a child and teenager.
"It was just something to think about," Tahiri whispered softly, caressing his face with one hand. "I'll be with you no matter what you decide."
He knew that she knew what he would choose. As a teenager, she'd already followed him into suicide missions and enemy-held territory. Had already known what he was thinking before the thoughts registered in his head. As his best friend of fourteen years, his wife of seven years, and mother of their children, their bond was so powerful

that she could sense all of his doubts, his hopes, his fears, and his dreams no matter how hard he tried to keep them from her. And the reverse was also true.
He could sense her reluctant acceptance of the situation; a determination not to leave their children parentless like she had been. A desire to make sure they had as 'normal' a life as possible despite everything. He could feel her love for him and their children, the sorrow that the family they were was about to be disrupted by events far outside their control. After all, how does one fight off a galaxy of problems? Rising above all her other emotions, however, was her trust in their bond; in their ability to get through these latest obstacles together like they had in the past.
"I love you," Anakin whispered, kissing the top of Tahiri's head as he fought back against the guilt his decision was causing him. "So much, Tahiri."
"Back at you, Hero Boy," Tahiri replied, hugging him tightly. Then jokingly, she looked up at him. "We haven't saved the galaxy in a while, this should be fun."
"Let me know if you decide to make some sort of resistance group out of dissident pirates," Anakin said wryly.
"Hey, the Freed Ones weren't my idea, they were yours!" She poked at his chest. "Well, technically, they were Taan's. I just went along with it. *You* let me know if you're planning some crazy mission with minimal support and a high chance of death."
"Won't be doing that ever again," Anakin shook his head with a regretful smile.
"Wishful thinking if I ever heard it."
"Trying to stay positive here. Cassa doesn't like my negatude either."
"Speaking of Cassa," Tahiri murmured. Both parents could sense their eldest child happily skipping through the hallway with a small group of kids. "Looks like she's found some friends already."
"Making friends quickly, another thing she got from you."
"Definitely."
Only a couple of seconds later, Cassa rounded the doorway with her new group of friends in tow. "Mommy! Daddy!"
She sprinted towards them as fast as her legs could carry them and leaped into Anakin's arms first to give him a tight hug, then switched parents. Jedis'sei wasn't far behind, hugging Anakin the moment Cassa moved to Tahiri.
"Hey you two," Anakin said stroking one of Jedis'sei's lekku affectionately and mussing Cassa's hair. "Your friends?"

"Uh huh," Cassa took a deep breath and then launched into an information-filled spiel aided with gestures and bright-eyed laughter. Half-listening, Anakin exchanged an amused glance with Tahiri. He raised an eyebrow and mouthed 'remind you of anyone?' Tahiri promptly gave him a playful nudge.
"…And Jedi Tekli said that she'd look into Jun's condition and work with the shapers to make him better, and Josat wanted to help out so Tekli might make him her apprentice when he gets older. When I get bigger, am I going to have Ryza's daddy as my master? He said the Force just might have the sense of humor to make things that way, and Ryza's daddy's really funny…" Cassa continued on, seemingly oblivious to the wide-eyed stares of her newfound friends. "Did you know that when she gets bigger, Cappricia is going to become a fish and speak fish-people. Maybe I can learn how to speak their language and then I can talk with other fish…"
Jedis'sei simply sighed and tapped on Cassa's shoulder. "Huh?"
"{You're doing it again. Cassa.}"
"Wha…oh," Cassa blushed. She looked to her new friends sheepishly. "Sorry. I do that sometimes. Talking's fun. I like learning other languages too. I know Huttese and Basic and Yuuzhan Vong…." Then as if realizing what she was doing, she took another big breath and clamped her mouth shut with an impish smile.
"That's neat," Josat finally managed once he could get a word in. When they all turned to him to see if he was going to say any more, he shrugged helplessly.
This caused everyone to laugh.
"Don't worry, her mom does that to me sometimes too," Anakin said empathically.
"So the two of you really are *the* Anakin and Tahiri from Master Tionne's stories and the holocron?" Jun asked almost worshipfully.
"And did you really help free the Yuuzhan Vong and help end the war?" Josat added.
"We had a small part in it, yes," Anakin said with a patient smile. So much for staying out of the spotlight. If Tionne's been telling tales, he doubted there wouldn't be many Jedi who didn't know his and Tahiri's name. So much for trying to fight fate. As if sensing his thoughts, Tahiri rubbed his arm.
Cassa was having none of it though. "They don't like talking about it, so leave them alone!"
"But Master Solusar says that we shouldn't forget the past," Cappricia looked almost horrified that heroes from the stories she had grown up

with were off-limits even if they were standing right in front of her.
"That what your mommy and daddy did shaped the Order of today."
"It's okay, Cassa," Tahiri gently lifted her daughter off the ground and into a reassuring hug. "Your daddy and I kind of expected this when we returned."
"You won't get sad or sorry?" Cassa said in a little voice, small hands gripping the fabric of Tahiri's robes. "I don't like it when you and daddy feel sad and not happy."
"I know Cassa," Tahiri murmured, patting her back. She exchanged a significant look with her significant other, both feeling each other's worries and aiding the other in hiding it from their very sensitive daughter. But how long would they be able to shield her and Jayce? Worse, what would happen when there was finally a situation that they couldn't think their way out of? What would happen then? Holding Anakin's gaze and still rubbing Cassa's back, Tahiri inclined her head and whispered a bit more softly. "I know."

}-(VI)-{ }-(VI)-{

The three days thus far spent at the Ossus Praxeum was oddly disconcerting for Anakin's branch of the Solo clan and Tekli and Danni. There was so much that was familiar, yet different. So much the same, yet with one or two things not like before. Like a picture slightly off-centered, the time was hardly the relaxing reintroduction to the galaxy the crew of the *Veila* thought it would be. Nevertheless, they did their best to adjust to the unfamiliar facets of a galaxy they had been away from for nearly seven years.
Cassa and Jedis'sei, however, were having a blast interacting with children with abilities like theirs. To them, they were on a fun and adventure filled vacation, learning sights and sounds they had only seen in qahsa and computer databanks or heard of in the stories of those told on Zonama. The wide variety of different species on Ossus also enabled the two young Jedi-in-training to get used to the galaxy a little at a time.
"Anakin, Anakin, Anakin."
Anakin opened his eyes from his meditation and saw an older, red and gray-haired Jedi settling onto the flagstones of the courtyard before him. She had her eyes closed, but her attention was no doubt focused on him. "Master Esterhazy."
"Just Scout," the Jedi of the Republic era answered simply. "It is strange how two Anakins could be so different, yet so alike."
"For someone of your time, recent events must seem frighteningly familiar," Anakin said in answer, delving further into the Force. The world around him took on hues of gray as he observed the world not

with his eyes, but with the Force. Life was shaded in blues and reds; serenity and aggression spiking depending on the situation and who the person was.
"Indeed. Your return was more than a bit unsettling as well. Considering what happened the last time an Anakin got involved in a galaxy as twisted as this one has become. The chaos, the thirst for power, for knowledge, they were his undoing. Are what led to the dark side."
He didn't need the Force to know that Scout was viewing him through the Force much like he was viewing the surroundings. He focused his gaze on her. The cool blue of serenity and peace shrouded her, but at her core was a burning red blaze of determination, of anger, of regret. He also knew what her unasked question was by the way she fell silent at her last words.
"Fearing the dark side would be fearing a part of who you are," Anakin said simply. "From what Tionne taught me as a child, even the Jedi of your time believed fear was a bad thing. If you were afraid of yourself, that's a whole lot worse."
"You don't believe your grandfather fell?"
"Oh he fell, but I don't think it was for the reasons you stated," Anakin said simply. "I once had a very long talk with a sentient planet about him. Granted, Sekot only knew him as an eleven-year old boy, but still…Most of what Sekot said made sense. He was afraid of losing those he loved, plain and simple. Yet because the Order of his time frowned upon such feelings, love and fear, he internalized both. When everyone around you seemed to be the perfect Jedi, following orders and purging yourself of emotion, who would you talk to? Who do you think would understand these feelings you aren't supposed to have? He was lost to the Jedi Order long before he himself even realized it."
The red flame that flickered at Scout's core flared out for a fraction, before being forced back into its little corner. "You are saying that the fall of your grandfather was the fault of the Order of my time?"
"The fault of its philosophies, not the Order itself. No Order is perfect, why do you think the Jedi Order keeps falling?" Anakin reasoned. "I'm sure you already noticed the fault of the current order."
"Yes, there is no unity, only discord."
"No peace, only chaos," Anakin paraphrased the Jedi Code.
"Your masters sought to have a diverse array of Jedi and experiences to better care for the galaxy. Unlike the Order of my time, yours is highly decentralized. Both its greatest strength, but also its greatest weakness."

"So I'm not the only one who thinks so," Anakin sighed, returning his vision to normal.
"If my memory serves, young Solo, you had a large hand in the current shape of this Order."
"Not that it excuses anything, but would you have let a frightened teenager with more burdens than even an adult could bear, help create the next generation of Jedi?"
"Probably not. That is the difference between you and your grandfather, though. You recognize that you are being used, by others, by the Force. You know who your friends are and who your enemies are. But the minute you lose sight of that…"
"I become little more than a weapon, a symbol whose meaning can change on the whim of the people viewing it," Anakin finished. "I know. Like I said earlier, seven years is a long time to reflect on what didn't go quite so well during the war."
"The others of my time are wary of the recent turns of events," Scout said. "The parallels, the clouding of the Force, they are too great to ignore. You know full well that coincidence is not something the Jedi should believe in. Something is on the horizon. Something great, yet dark."
Anakin opened his mouth to respond, then closed it and smiled as he glanced up to the sky. "Then it's a good thing my uncle and most of my family have returned. We can talk about battling great dark things to our hearts content when they land."
Scout raised an eyebrow as the familiar shapes of the *Falcon* and *Jade Shadow* cut through the blue sky. "They are early, but I suppose the Force knows what it is doing."
"Don't worry, Master Esterhazy," Anakin said with a small wink. "This Jedi Order won't go the way of the first one, and you'll get to live a nice long life teaching the little ones."
Scout smiled wanly. "I could only hope so, young Anakin. I would not like to contemplate the alternative."
}-(Chapter End)-{

Zekk
}-(I)-{ }-(I)-{
The gleaming gold spires of the Fountain Palace was awash in shades of orange, yellows, and reds as the sun began to dip below the horizon. It was a clear day, the sky glowing in a myriad of colors as the cool purples and blues of night slowly pushed back the brilliance of the warm sunlight. A soft breeze carried with it the scent of a crisp wind; keeping the planet a pleasant temperature even into the twilight. The

Transitory Mists that shrouded the Consortium from the rest of the galaxy continued to refract a brilliant array of light, enhancing the glow from the seven moons of Hapes and keeping true night at bay. Stars by the billions winked into a faded existence, moons, planets, all sparkling in the rainbow-like evening sky spreading over the Hapan capital of Tenel Ka Chume'Dan.

Tenel Ka Chume'Dan.

Zekk shook his head with an amused smile. He wondered what his long time friend thought of it. Having the seat of the Hapan Consortium named after her may have been Hapan tradition, but he knew Tenel Ka well enough to imagine the anguish the renaming ceremony must have created. Then again, maybe she had gone along with it due to the necessity of such ceremony. Tenel Ka, if anything, was probably one of the most pragmatic people he knew.

The city of three-hundred thousand stretched out all around the towering basalt crag on which the royal palace sat. It was hard to imagine that everything he could see, and more, now belonged to his childhood friend. That Tenel Ka was literally a queen in charge of the well-being of billions of lives spread out over sixty-three star systems. Just thinking about that made him recall the days long past.

Ever since the Yuuzhan Vong War had ended he had pretty much fallen out of touch with all of the 'old crowd.' Lowie was flying around with Han, Jaina flying around with the Chiss, Jacen busy with the Senate, Tenel Ka became a queen, Raynar and Anja were dead, and old Peckhum had finally succumbed to old age. Zekk seriously doubted any of his former Shadow Academy associates cared if he kept in contact or not.

Yet, some part of himself was okay with it, Zekk realized with a jolt. He had always been a loner, someone who didn't quite fit in despite his best efforts. After his friendship with Jaina crash and burned during the war, he had become even more distant from that tight-knit group of Jedi that formed the core of the New Jedi Order. As an orphan, he had never 'fit in' anywhere for any long period of time. Had never developed a 'family' to call his own, or a place to truly call home. Even though he considered the Solos and the others his friends and was grateful for their friendship in turn, he had moved on.

They had all moved on, their paths taking them in opposite directions. Of course, their paths would bring them together on occasion, like it had at the moment, but he knew it was a temporary thing. The moment his leave expired, he'd be right back out and about in the galaxy, chasing down pirates and helping refugees settle down.

"Deep thoughts?"

Zekk glanced over his shoulder, he hadn't even heard her approach. "Not so deep, Trista."
The more serious of the twins silently stepped out onto the balcony of the guest room with him. "I did not mean to intrude, if you'd rather ponder alone..."
"No," Zekk smiled warmly. "No, it's okay. Still getting acquainted with the planet, I guess. These past few years, I never stayed in one place for too long. Whatever ship I was stationed on became where I roomed for the day, or week. Only stayed in a system long enough to chase the bad guys out of it."
"Seems tedious," Trista commented absently, her tanned skin and copper hair seemingly glowing in the rays of the dying sunlight.
"Yeah," Zekk chuckled to himself. "But it's what I do as a Jedi."
Trista nodded silently.
"Taryn told me what happened between the two of you," Zekk ventured gently. "About Zedal and how you disapproved of him."
Trista nodded again, her eyes fluttering closed as a flash of pain raced across her tightly controlled features.
"She wants her sister back too, you know."
Trista's eyes flew open and pleading gray eyes quickly began searching his face. "She doesn't."
"She does," Zekk whispered.
"I...I can't, not as long as she is still with him."
"She said that you think Zedal is using her for information?"
"Yes," Trista said hoarsely. "Sometime around when the two of them became...intimate, House AlGray began obtaining classified documents from the Queen Mother's personal files. Files only we or the Queen Mother's most trusted advisors have access to. Some of the information was used to orchestrate plots against other houses, enabling House AlGray to rise at the same time. There is only circumstantial evidence that Zedal is responsible, but it is not hard to connect the dots. Zedal is fourth in line of his house, my sister is one of the few people with access to classified information. The moment my sister abandoned her duty for her 'love' for this man, his family began to benefit from it. I tried to tell her that she was being used, that she was being foolish for risking everything for something that wasn't even real, but she wouldn't hear of it. Without concrete proof, she said..."
Trista trailed off, jaw tightening and her gray eyes losing the fire that was normally in them. "It doesn't really matter what she said. All that is important is that she stops seeing Zedal before..."
"Before she gets hurt?" Zekk finished gently."

Trista nodded once, her eyes squeezed shut as she turned away from Zekk. "I had promised father on his death bed that I would look out for her, shelter her the best I could from the court intrigue and backstabbing that took the life of our parents. That way, she can continue to be the carefree Taryn we all know and care for. It was the last promise I made to father, and the first I've ever broken."
"You and your sister are so alike, you know that?"
"We can't be any more different if we tried," Trista objected.
"Nah, that's only to those who don't know the two of you well," Zekk took a step forward. "Both of you are so passionate, confident. Your family, your friends, they're why you do what you do, why you're so dedicated to Tenel Ka and to each other. Even with the fight between you and your sister I can still sense the bond you have with one and other. The connection that will remain no matter how bad things will become."
"Really?" Trista whispered hoarsely.
"Yeah," Zekk nodded, taking another step forward. The seventeen year old warrior-girl turned back around, the hopeful expression on her face so similar to what he had seen on Taryn's face earlier in the day.
"I..." Trista glanced back at the last visages of the setting sun. "I don't know what to do though. How to make any of this better. I can't bother the Queen Mother with my problems, but at the same time, I can't turn to anyone else either. Ta'a Chume had mother assassinated when we were little for giving birth to Taryn and I, and dad was killed protecting the current Queen Mother. It's every woman for themselves on Hapes. I've spent the last year, two months, four weeks, and three days trying to come up with some sort of solution. But things only continue to grow further and further from my ability to manage it. Father was so proud when I became the youngest officer on the Queen Mother's security detail. But this mess, this distraction, caused me to lose that status, caused me to nearly miss an assassin who almost killed the Queen Mother. I don't...I don't know..."
Zekk, hearing the unspoken plea, gently embraced the red-haired warrior. She stiffened at first, but then just rested her head against his shoulder, her hands rising to grip his arms.
"I promised your sister that I'd be a better friend than I was last time." Zekk murmured, rubbing Trista's back in small, reassuring circles. "I also promised that I'd hold up whatever was left of her world so she can put the rest of the pieces back together. That offer's good for you too, if you want."
"And I thought I was too tired to cry anymore," Trista whimpered softly, her body trembling. He could feel tear droplets soak into his tunic,

feeling nothing but relief emanate from the young woman in his arms.
"I could use a friend...if you want, Jedi Knight Zekk."
Zekk placed a tender kiss on Trista's forehead. "It'd be my honor, Lady Zel."
"Trista," Trista murmured, stepping back from Zekk. "If you're my friend, if you're Taryn's friend, it's just Trista."
"Alright," Zekk smiled understandingly. "But then it's just 'Zekk'"
"House Zel is fortunate we have our own personal Jedi friend," Trista managed, looking slightly embarrassed as she swiped at the last of her tears and tried to regain the regal bearing she had had previously.
"Don't worry, Trista, things will be right again. Will be just like what you were used to before all the craziness happened."
"That would be much appreciated," Trista offered him a very rare smile. "Thank you, Zekk."
"No need. Come on, let's go find Taryn. I think the two of you need to have another talk."
At those words, some of the confidence appeared to drain out of Trista.
"Now?"
"Yes," Zekk said gently. "If you wish it, I can be there too."
Trista nodded mutely.
Zekk offered his arm, and she almost reluctantly took it. "It won't be bad, Trista, I promise."
"Since arriving here this morning, you've made Taryn and I a lot of promises," Trista said softly.
"And I intend to keep every single one of them."
"Enjoying the sunset?"
"Something so final about one," Zekk said pensively, leaning on the banister of the balcony.
Taryn appeared on his right side while Trista appeared on his left, both mimicking his posture as they watched the sun set together.
"It always rises again the next day," Taryn chirped. "So it's not really final. The next day you can see the results of everything you did the previous day, learn from them, celebrate them. Kind of like how a curtain drops down to hide a surprise from you. When it rises, you get to see the results of the choices you made. Every day becomes a new adventure to be revealed by the rising of the sun. Like meeting you again, and again, when we least expect it. The day's over, so what? We'll see each other again the next day, and the day after that. And tomorrow, you get to spend your first full day as the Jedi Ambassador to the Consortium, and who knows what will wait for you when the sun rises again."

"Then again," Trista said steadily. "A setting sun means that everything you've done that day has just become irreversible, that you've made your choices and will now have to live with them. Sure, you might be able to go back and fix some of your actions the following day, but that will mean a whole day was wasted. The time spent during that day will be time never to be had again. The setting of the sun marking the end of opportunities, the end of the day. Like the birth of the *chume'da* Allana coinciding with the possible outbreak of a war between Hapes and Corellia, it is a day that will never come again, but will always be remembered forever more by those involved in the decisions made on such a day."

"So, Zekk," Taryn said, sliding one of her hands beneath his and then reversing her hand to interlace their fingers. "You said it was final, but is it a good final or a bad one?"

Zekk gave Taryn's hand a small squeeze as he glanced at both sisters fondly. "A good final, definitely. It's an end, but also the start of a new beginning. A setting sun is like the start of a reprieve from all the decisions you made that day. We all need a little bit of night too, a chance to re-center ourselves. A setting sun gives us that chance, announces the end of one day so we can prepare for the next. Like now, just the three of us, standing here, contemplating everything that's gone on."

The trio fell silent, watching the sun finally disappear, and the city-lights wink on block by block. The shimmering Transitory Mists continued to cast a greenish-white glow in the sky, the seven moons acting as giant mirrors and keeping the darkness of night from truly taking hold. They looked on, watching the subtle changes as the day slowly gave way to night.

Eventually, it was Taryn that broke the silence. "Hey, Zekk."

"Taryn?"

"Corellia, they have Jedi too, right?"

"Valin, Jysella, Natua, Master Horn," Zekk listed a few with a nod.

"Will….will we end up fighting them too?"

"She has a point," Trista said in subdued tones. "Jedi are not supposed to take sides, but here you are. What is stopping the Corellian Jedi from aiding their home planet in their own endeavors?"

Zekk released a slow breath. From the information he had received a short while ago, he already knew the answer to that question. It was one that made him feel ill, the very idea he'd be crossing swords with other Jedi. Just what had the galaxy come to?

"Are you okay?" Taryn asked softly.

"Not sure what I feel," Zekk replied with a shrug. "Kind of why I was watching the sun set. Today, before the sun set, they were my friends, my fellow Jedi. When the sun comes up again, I don't know what they'll be. Will they still be Jedi at heart, will I have to fight them? If I do, who will I be fighting them as? As a Jedi? Jedi aren't supposed to fight each other. Yet if I don't do something, why am I here on Hapes?"
"This is our planet too," Taryn said carefully. "If…and I mean a big 'if,' because I doubt any Jedi would suddenly go crazy and decide that waging war for the good of the galaxy is a bright idea, if we do go to war, Trista and I and all the royal guard will probably have to fight them too."
"All the reason to start those anti-Force user training lessons we talked about on Denon, huh," Zekk breathed, not liking the situation at all.
"If you don't mind, can you teach the rest of the Queen Mother's guard too?" Trista asked. "We've all sworn to defend her to the death, but we'd prefer staying among the living if at all possible."
Zekk managed a half-smile, nodding. "Not a problem. The personal guard still sixty-three people strong?"
"The ones' whose immediate duty is to guard the Queen Mother, yes," Taryn replied. "If you teach us, we can teach the rest of the Royal Guard some of the basics."
"Okay, let me come up with some sort of lesson plan and…wait a minute," Zekk quickly remembered where he was. "What will make the others want to listen to me? Aren't most Hapan officers and Royal Guardsmen female?"
"All are, but don't worry," Trista said coolly. "We'll swear on our family name that you won't waste their time."
"Also, most of the guards you'll be teaching already know you either through us or working with you when we had to track down those fools who tried to kill the *chume'da* in the womb. They know you're capable enough, for a man."
"Thanks, I think?"
"We'll work out some sort of schedule. Half of us are on duty at any given time, so you might have to give some lessons twice," Taryn smirked. "And you're welcome."
"We'll need to talk with our commander about this," Trista added, pulling away from the banister. "Given the importance of such lessons, we should do so now. If you'll excuse us, Zekk, we'll meet up with you again tomorrow."
"See you then."
"Definitely," Taryn said brightly, giving his hand a small squeeze before following her sister out of the room.

The doors closed behind them, and Zekk released another breath. Another day done, another day coming up. He sincerely hoped that it wouldn't be as eventful as the one he had just had. In fact, apart from an all-out war actually commencing, he couldn't see *how* it could be more eventful than the past few days he had just had.

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"The situation has grown grim indeed, but we will not falter," Queen Mother Tenel Ka said firmly, addressing the gathered ministers, advisors, and nobles. Despite having given birth only a day earlier, she projected an air of power and confidence that was expected of the Queen Mother of sixty-three systems. "Hapes will not tolerate any violations of its territory, and we *will* persecute any Hapans who thought it wise to betray the Consortium to outside interest. As it becomes clearer that the Galactic Alliance is not only unwilling, but unable, to assist us, Hapes will have to resolve this matter on our own."

A voice interrupted from the crowd. "Pardon me for asking, Your Majesty. Though we are more than capable of defending ourselves, as we have proven during the last war, are we truly prepared to go up against Corellia and all her allies? Corellia is friends with Fondor, with Adumar, and Chandrilla. Any war will prove too costly for the Consortium to wage, especially since most of our resources are currently devoted to various reconstruction projects spread throughout the galaxy."

"Before you forget, Lady Cora, Hapes does not stand alone. The reason Bothan Admiral Ardas Fey'lya is here today is because he has pledge the support of the Independent Bothan States should war indeed break out between Corellia and Hapes."

"Yes, Queen Mother." Streaks of gray lined the brown-furred Bothan Admiral as he inclined his head to the rest. "The Bothans are willing to honor our longtime alliance with Hapes despite the fact that we are no longer part of the Galactic Alliance. We will dedicate as many of our assault cruisers and frigates as needed to fend off this blatant display of expansionism, doing what the Galactic Alliance remains incapable of accomplishing themselves. Even the Corellians will think twice before engaging our fleets."

"And on that note, Jedi Ambassador Zekk," Tenel Ka turned to where Zekk was.

"Your Highness?" Zekk bowed politely.

"Due to the intricate political nature of Hapes, we require an independent and impartial investigator. We wish to know just how the

Corellians were capable of concealing a force capable of destroying our Battle Dragons so deep in Consortium space."
"Since the Jedi hardly desire war between Corellia and Hapes, I am at your disposal." Zekk held Tenel Ka's even gray stare, communicating through the Force his determination to keep the peace and protect both her and Allana.
"Then you will accompany a team of the Royal Guard to the Relephon Moons. Captain Moreem Espara will lead the unit, and you will be their advisor."
"As you command," Zekk nodded.
"It sounds as if you distrust House AlGray, Your Highness," one of the nobles spoke up. "In the past six years, they have been nothing but supportive of your rule."
"Then they and their allies should have nothing to fear," Tenel Ka said mildly. She addressed the rest of her audience. "In the meantime, keep the alert level on high, the order to fire on any Corellian vessel in Hapan space remains. Should there be a repeat of the Relephon Moons incident, the military advisors will gather and discuss appropriate retaliatory measures. Hapes can ill-afford a war so soon after the Yuuzhan Vong War, economically, politically, and socially. If there are any of you who are aware of plots of that very nature, your Queen Mother advises you to think long and hard about the direction your actions will take the Consortium. Is the throne, is power, truly worth the lives of all those who will die in the fighting? We now ask all but the military officers to leave. There is much to do, and very little time to accomplish it."
Zekk exited the assembly chambers through a side door, standing out amongst the Hapans in their royal finery with his simple Jedi robes. It was probably how Taryn and Trista found him and somehow appeared at his side.
"Jedi Ambassador Zekk," Taryn said with uncharacteristic professionalism.
"Lady Zel?" Zekk raised an eyebrow. From Trista's expression, she was nearly as surprised as he was.
"This way, please. Captain Espara wanted to debrief the team personally before we departed."
"The both of you are on the team?"
"The Queen Mother felt it best if you were familiar with some of the people you were working with," Trista confirmed after finding her voice. "Taryn's and my unit has been assigned the investigation given our familiarity with House AlGray."

"I *have* worked with Captain Espara before," Zekk mentioned dryly. "In fact, Corporal Taryn Zel, Sergeant Trista Zel, haven't I worked with your entire squadron at least thrice before?"
"So you don't wish to have us on the team?" Taryn asked angelically.
Zekk glowered and promptly mussed her red, braided hair. "You know better than that. It'll be nice working alongside Moreem and the others again."
"That's not what you said after the first time we worked together," Taryn giggled, self-consciously glancing about the people-filled hall as she tried to fix her hair. "You should have heard some of the things she had to say about you too."
"Taryn," Trista sighed, just shaking her head. "She's our superior officer."
"And your girlfriend, I know," Taryn grumbled.
"Taryn!"
"Oh?" Zekk glanced to Trista. "Recent development?"
"Very," Trista mumbled, slightly red-faced. "Let's go."
"Lead the way, Sergeant Zel. Looks like House AlGray has earned itself another visit," Zekk motioned. As he did, he recalled just how he had first met Moreem Espara and the situation that had led to his first visit to the Relephon Moons.
"Lieutenant Espara." Trista snapped to attention.
"Corporal Zel." Lieutenant Moreem Espara, part of Tenel Ka's elite guard, was the picture of lethal beauty. Tall and slender, probably only a couple years younger than he was, she had shoulder-length raven-black hair tied off into a simple pony-tail, angular features, and fiery brown eyes. There was not an ounce of excess fat on her, her blue Hapan Royal Guard uniform enhancing the lean musculature of the woman. "On your way to see your sister?"
"Yes, sir."
"Unfortunately, I will have to come with you."
"Sir?"
"A warrant was issued for your sister's arrest. Being your commanding officer, I felt obligated to carry out the arrest myself. She's being charged with high treason, leaking classified information to enemies of the throne."
Trista's mouth opened and closed several times, her body becoming ramrod straight. "Sir…Moreem, please, my sister…"
Moreem's expression softened and she placed a hand on the teen's shoulder. "Trista, I know you and your sister would never betray your cousin. That the both of you are as loyal as I am, perhaps even more, when it comes to her safety. But recent events and the evidence

gathered suggests House AlGray is gaining their information somehow. Even the Queen Mother couldn't ignore the situation any longer and signed the warrant personally."
"But…but high treason, that carries an automatic death sentence," Trista breathed, panic rising above her normally controlled countenance. "Who led the investigation? What evidence? When General Livette and I first started tracking the leaks, circumstantial evidence was the only thing we found."
"Dukat Aleson Gray lead the investigation after an internal audit determined you would be too biased to analyze evidence correctly," Moreem explained. "There's a possibility that you might be charged too depending on the outcome of your sister's trial."
"Do you have to serve Taryn the warrant immediately?" Trista asked, her mind racing out of concern for her sister, grasping for straws. "Maybe a second investigation into the matter, or…"
"Corporal Zel," Moreem chided gently.
Trista immediately whirled around to Zekk, gray eyes wide and fearful. "Zekk."
Trista said only one word, but he could feel the countless emotions and words his name conveyed. The single syllable tugged at his heart, and he resisted the urge to hug Trista again and reassure her that everything would be okay. "Lieutenant Espara, I am Jedi Knight Zekk, a friend of House Zel. Would the authorities accept an independent Jedi investigation into the matter before the arrest is actually carried out? It is in the best interest of the galaxy that the current Queen Mother remains on the throne and is surrounded by those she can trust."
"'Interest of the galaxy?'" Moreem remarked sarcastically. "Since when do Jedi get involved in minor investigations? Are you saying that Hapes is incapable of…"
"Not at all," Zekk said smoothly.
"Then why involve yourself? What did Trista promise you to have you go out of your way like this?" The darkened tone of Moreem's voice was unmistakable.
Zekk could understand Moreem's protectiveness and quickly sought to allay her fears. "Nothing, I'm simply a friend helping friends in need."
"We can trust him, sir," Trista spoke up almost anxiously. "He's one of the Jedi who fought in the war with great success."
Moreem blinked in surprise at Trista, then studied Zekk again. "Wait a minute, Jedi Knight Zekk….you're the one who brought down the ceiling of the Queen Mother's chambers, weren't you?"
"And he assisted Taryn and I in the apprehension of the Ni'Korish smuggler on Tatooine," Trista added.

The Hapan lieutenant folded her arms in front of her as her hawkish eyes narrowed. "Trista, you know how unorthodox this will be. Hapes has always handled her problems without outside intervention."
"Sir, please," Trista whispered hoarsely. "I can't lose my sister. Please, I'll be willing to accept another demotion for bringing an outsider into this, but give Jedi Knight Zekk the chance to make things right."
Moreem rubbed at her face tiredly, looking away with tightened jaw. "Spirits, I'm going to get into so much trouble for this. Fine. Look, Trista, provided that your sister remains at his side throughout his investigation, and that the results of the investigation reveal a different traitor, it technically is possible to delay the arrest. I can say that the Jedi used the central authority of the Galactic Alliance or some fodder like that. Given that he's a friend of the Queen Mother, I doubt anyone will protest too strenuously."
"Thank you," Trista moved forward and hugged the older woman. Then, as if remembering her place, stepped back and bowed her head. "Sorry, sir."
"It's understandable. Jedi Knight Zekk, as a representative of the Queen Mother's Elite Guard, I am afraid I will have to assist on accompanying you on this investigation. Both Corporal and Private Zel are my subordinates, and I will not leave their fates to some unknown male no matter how much trust they have vested in you."
"Welcome aboard, Lieutenant Espara," Zekk inclined his head respectfully. "Given that you know Hapan politics the best, would you recommend a starting point for my investigation?"
Moreem studied Zekk once more, as if trying to discover what his angle was. Finally, she nodded. "The Relephon Moons are House AlGray's allotted territory within the Consortium; Ducha Temperess AlGray ruling."
"I would appreciate it if you could arrange for us to travel there, and have the results of Dukat Gray's investigations forwarded to me," Zekk phrased carefully. "Trista and I will go to tell Taryn the news."
"See that Taryn does not leave your side for any reason," Moreem ordered coolly. "I won't be able to protect her if security forces from a rival House decide to arrest her. The Queen Mother, after all, was the one who issued the initial order."
"Understood," Zekk acknowledged. "And thank you, Lieutenant."
Moreem nodded curtly then spun on her heels and walked back down the hallway.
"She's been great to Taryn and I, especially after our father was killed," Trista whispered softly, swaying and reaching a single hand out to grip the sleeve of Zekk's robes. "We were assigned to her straight out of

training camp. Her first subordinates really, since she graduated from officer's training school around the same time. You understand, right Zekk, how much she's sticking her neck out for us? A rival house can easily target her now if it's proven that Taryn is in fact the source of the leak."
"We'll prove otherwise, Trista," Zekk said. "You and your sister are way too smart to fall for something like that. When this is all over, Espara can thumb her nose at those other houses and you and Taryn will be back at the Queen Mother's side."
"Promises, promises," Trista smiled faintly. "I don't think I've ever truly believed in the Force until now."
"Trista?"
"Is it a coincidence that you've come to Hapes, earlier than Jedi Solo or the Queen Mother asked you to, when Taryn and I needed help the most?"
"Maybe not the Force, but there's definitely a force...or two, involved," Zekk said dryly, sending another mental glare to Jacen and Tenel Ka. He received nods acknowledgment, and sent a pouting image of himself in turn. The longer he was on Hapes, the greater an understanding he was getting of his supposed role. Tenel Ka couldn't be seen helping either twin openly, regardless of how much trouble the two were in. Hapan politics dictated that those she showed favor to were those that had to be targeted. At the same time, Tenel Ka wasn't about to just throw her two younger cousins to the wolves. Which is where he came in; for better or worse. "We should go find Taryn now. Maybe the two of you can have that talk on the shuttle ride to the Relephon Moons."
"Nothing like a charge of high treason to make everything else seem insignificant. When we find the AlGray infiltrator involved, he or she is definitely going to regret framing my sister."
"Jedi Knight Zekk," Moreem greeted.
"Captain Espara," Zekk said with mutual respect, bowing politely.
"Sir," both Taryn and Trista saluted, and moved to their seats when dismissed.
Zekk took a seat at the back of the room, receiving several brief greetings from the other members of Moreem's team. For the most part, the ten-person team was the same as it had been when he first met them.
Though the Royal Guard had their own ranking system and divisions, Moreem, like Taryn, Trista, and the rest of their squad, were special in that they were also part of the Royal Navy. When Trista and Taryn declared their oaths of loyalty to Tenel Ka and proclaimed their lives

for hers, Tenel Ka had immediately formed a Royal Guard unit specifically for them as a way to safeguard her cousins in return. Since it was extremely rare for the Queen Mother to have first-cousins with absolutely no aspirations for the throne, the nobility accepted this arrangement as a means of safe-guarding the royal lineage should the worst occur. The unit had been handpicked by Tenel Ka herself to ensure that Trista and Taryn would always be with people they could trust.

All were very intelligent, beautiful women, taller and more muscular than an average Hapan woman, and were more than capable warriors and could probably kick his butt in more ways than one if he let his guard down. Their skills as commandos and the way they so expertly dismantled any threats to the throne had proven just why they were part of the Queen Mother's 'Favored' elite.

Each of the warrior women present had a specialty, but also a few 'hobbies' on the side. There was the tall and lanky brunette seated in front of him, Lieutenant Kiali Beyele. Engineer by trade, Beyele was just as proficient at demolition and slicing. If it had electrical parts and was capable of exploding, she was your person to go to.

Petite, yet just as deadly brunette, First Lieutenant Lilan Irina was the team's medic, psychologist, and bio-weapon specialist. She was a bit more than frightening considering she knew exactly where on your body to target to cause the most debilitating, yet survivable blaster wounds.

There was also the tall and muscular blond, Corporal Chiri Aros. Chiri Aros was the team's heavy-weapon's expert and had the most ironic hobby of being its cultural and archaeological historian as well. The history of most of the Consortium was known to her, enabling the team to understand various tactics and intrigue that formed the foundation of many a noble house. A trait they were more than grateful for.

There were others in the squadron, of course; Zekk's eyes swept the room as he noted the familiar faces. He found it strange that he considered his missions with them as just another one of his many adventures on Hapes. That this group of lethal beauties had essentially become a second family to him. He had to shake his head and smile ruefully. For someone who was supposed to have no roots, no place to belong, he seemed to be returning to this planet more than was often since Jacen had sent him that HoloNet message two years ago.

"This is a complicated mission, diplomatically," Moreem began the briefing. "House AlGray, as you all know, is a vocal supporter of Queen Mother Tenel Ka and has actively thwarted several attempts to assassinate her. Other houses look to them as leaders of the

Consortium and they have the loyalty of a fair amount of the nobility. For those not as acquainted with house politics, House AlGray has also had its sights firmly on the Queen Mother's throne for some time, sponsoring some of those said assassination attempts and then foiling them to prove their loyalty to the throne. Unfortunately, Ducha Temperess AlGray is a veteran player of the game and is nigh impossible to take down unless caught red-handed, which she never is. Given the fact that we will have Jedi Knight Zekk with us, we will be conducting interviews as covertly as possible, letting him signal if he senses any deception. We are to stick together at all times, acting only to apprehend any traitors if we have indisputable proof."
"Captain, what if we find Corellians at the Relephon Moons?" Spiky-blond-haired Lieutenant Nyrani Lovett, a daughter of one of the Royal Fleet commanders and an heir to one of the minor noble houses, asked.
"The Queen Mother's orders are to eliminate any Corellians vessels within Hapan space. If we encounter them on the ground, they are to be apprehended immediately," Moreem replied icily. "Should House AlGray take steps to protect those Corellians, we will then know where they truly stand. Is that clear?"
"Yes, sir!"
Moreem surveyed the rest of the ten-person unit. "Then load up. I want us at the Relephon Moons before the day is out."
The ten others saluted sharply and began to pile out of the room. Moreem approached Zekk, a wry expression on her face. "Here we go again, Jedi Knight Zekk."
"No kidding," Zekk said, forcing a smile. "Hapan politics never seems to change, does it?"
"If it does, I'd be out of a job," Moreem said ruefully. "Thank you, for staying on as the Jedi Ambassador."
"The Jedi Order has an obligation to Hapes."
"To Hapes? Or to a certain royal house?" Moreem said wisely. After the two years of off and on working together, they had developed a strangely sibling-like relationship. And though he was the older one chronologically, they often took turns being the older brother or sister.
"You know the answer to that, captain," Zekk remarked softly. "I care greatly for Taryn and Trista, but we all have duties that must come first."
"When you realize that you can still accomplish your duty and be more than just a friend to Taryn, let me know. After Trista, I'll probably be next in line to approve of that improvement in relations," Moreem replied just as softly. "You know Taryn's always at her best whenever

you visit, always has that extra fire and drive that isn't present when you're away. Since that incident with the AlGrays two years ago…well, sometimes, someone worth fighting for, something worth fighting for, makes our tiresome duties all the more bearable."
Zekk nodded slowly. "I'll think about it."
"Do so. We Hapan women are patient, but we aren't going to wait to the end of time," Moreem smirked.
"It's funny, two years ago you were doing your best to convince Taryn and Trista that I was just trying to take advantage of them," Zekk commented as they left the room together. "That, let me see if I remember correctly, I was trying to 'make them feel so indebted to me that they would have no choice but to go along with my wicked desires'? Now you're actually joining the Queen Mother and the shadowy group of people pushing me and Taryn together?"
"It just goes to show that the Zels know quality material when they see it," Moreem replied dryly.
"Speaking of, I heard that you and Trista…"
"Taryn has a big mouth," Moreem looked away, color filling her cheeks. "I'm lucky the Hapan Consortium doesn't have any rules against fraternization."
"Congratulations," Zekk smiled.
"We've only been 'officially' together for two weeks, so I'm still trying to make sense of things. Not sure if I'm just plain crazy or not."
"She's the one that did the chasing?"
"You know the Zel family well," Moreem muttered with a shy smile of her own.
"No kidding," Zekk laughed. "Do I even need to bother with the 'don't break her heart' speech?"
"Go ahead," Moreem replied glibly. "That gives me the right to return the favor when you finally stop being so male about it and get together with Taryn."
"You seem so certain that's going to happen."
"Jedi Knight Zekk, practically everyone who knows you two *knows* you'll end up together. It's only a matter of timing. When was the last time several hundred Hapan women were wrong?"
Zekk's mouth moved soundlessly, his mind freezing.
"Thought so." Moreem smiled wryly. "I'm not saying this entirely for selfless reasons. Trista's always happiest when Taryn's happy. And I'm with you in wanting both of them to be as happy as possible. So find the right moment and just tell Taryn how you feel. If you don't want to be with her in that way, let her know so her heart can move on."
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"I still love him," Taryn whispered, looking absolutely miserable as she looked to her twin.
"You're being charged with high treason because of your relationship with him!" Trista hissed.
"I can't just turn my emotions off like you do!" Taryn said, her gray eyes burning fiercely. Realizing what she said, she looked back down, her body quivering. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."
"It's okay," Trista murmured, staring pointedly at some spot on the bulkhead of their shuttle. "I...I probably shouldn't be so hard too. But ever since you've started a relationship with him..."
"I've been happy," Taryn replied in a small voice. "So happy. He was there for me when I was growing up, there when father was killed and you distanced yourself from me. I was happy, we were happy. And then everything got complicated. Why did everything have to get so complicated?"
"I don't know," Trista replied helplessly. "You really love him?"
Taryn nodded, teary gray eyes glinting in the dim light of the cargo hold. "He wouldn't betray me, use me to get information. I know it. Please, believe me Trista. He's not like that."
"We'll know soon enough," Trista replied, unable to hold her sister's desperate gaze.
Taryn hugged herself once more, turning her attention to the silent Jedi by the near wall. "Did Aleson's report have anything useful?"
Zekk, setting down a datapad, shook his head. "At first glance, the evidence does seem to be against you. The information bursts to the Relephon Moons coincide with times when you and he were near areas containing sensitive information. Royal Intelligence Services also recorded the usage of your security code around the same time. Given that the houses more recently affected by the information leaks are hostile to both House Zel and AlGray...well..."
"You said at first glance, though," Trista said.
"Much of the information the Dukat analyzed were already uncovered by you and General Livette a year prior," Zekk said, gesturing to a second datapad. "Many of his conclusions are reinterpretations of the circumstantial data you collected. The few new pieces of evidence seemed tossed in if only to make his interpretations all the more authoritative. For example, he didn't take into account that almost a dozen others know the security codes of the lower-level protectors in the Royal Guard, as well as the override code. The information bursts may have been delayed specifically to throw any investigators off, as neither your investigation nor his were able to narrow down the device

used to transmit the information. If Zedal is as loyal as Taryn says he is, he might be able to help us with the investigation."
Trista glanced almost fearfully at Taryn. "We'll be landing shortly, so one way or another, everything will be resolved then."
"This brings back memories," Taryn sighed, seeing the massive purple and blue swirling sphere of the gas giant Relephon in the window of their transport. The Relephon Moons were the near thirty bodies of space rock orbiting the gas giant. Some were the size of Hapes itself, while others were little bigger than an asteroid. There were cities and mining outfits, smaller colonies and research stations. All manner of traffic traversed around the gas giant from moon to moon. In a daring feat of architecture, some of the moons were even connected together by super-tensile walkways.
"You'll be okay?" Trista murmured, reaching out to take her sister's hand comfortingly.
Taryn squeezed the hand, swallowing as she did. "Yeah. It's in the past."
"We'll need to check the outlying areas for any Corellians," Moreem said gruffly. "If you want to visit..."
"Maybe when this is all over," Taryn said quickly, with a ghost of pain in her voice. "But he wouldn't want me to ignore my duty to Hapes, even for him."
"Lady Zel, I just heard, are you okay?" Zedal was there to greet them the moment they disembarked, and the hasty steps he took towards Taryn were in no way fake. Zekk could feel genuine worry and concern pulsate out from the younger man...Or was the man savvy enough to know how to broadcast emotions?
Taryn embraced Zedal, her body trembling as she did. "I've been better, Zee. How...?"
Heavy footsteps interrupted the touching moment. "Zedal! I sure hope you aren't embracing the fugitive. You should be arresting her, not comforting her. The Queen Mother herself signed the warrant."
"Sister," Zedal noted, a protective arm wrapped around Taryn's waist. A dark-haired woman, escorted by several security officers, had entered the hangar bay from the far side and was fast approaching. Zedal's sister noted the others and forced a pleasant expression on her sharp features. In the end, it looked more like she was grimacing than smiling. "Forgive the rudeness. I am Ducha'da Tiraena AlGray, next in line after my mother, the Ducha Temperess AlGray. Welcome to Saf'raire, or as the outsiders from the rest of the galaxy call it, Sapphire, home of House AlGray."

"A pleasure to meet you, Ducha'da," Zekk began, using the Force to make it seem like he was speaking the Hapan native tongue. Clad in standard Hapan clothes, he almost introduced himself as a Jedi, but then thought better of it when he realized where he was. This was still in Hapan space, and one never revealed all of one's cards outright. "I am Zekk, a friend of House Zel."
"Just Zekk?" Tiraena said with an almost dismissive smirk.
"Is there a problem?"
Rather than answer, Tiraena bypassed him and headed for Moreem, the ranking female. "Lieutenant, what brings a member of the Queen Mother's Royal Guard all the way out here? Is her highness planning to visit?"
"If she was, you'd be the last to know," Moreem replied with a raised eyebrow. "For Her Majesty's security, of course."
Tiraena's eyes narrowed. "Of course. So if she isn't coming, then why have you come here? I heard you invoked the Queen Mother's name to get landing clearance, so it must be a matter of some importance."
"I'm conducting a second look at the materials gathered during the investigation of the information leak."
"With the Queen Mother's blessing? Why would she sign an arrest warrant for the culprit if she wasn't absolutely sure?"
"That information is for the Ducha's ears only. Might we talk with her?"
Gesturing to Zedal, Tiraena shook her head. "I am afraid that's not possible, lieutenant. Ever since we were kidnapped by pirates en route to a diplomatic function on Adumar, she hasn't been the same. It is best if she has her rest. I will be more than capable of handling any of your requests. In the meantime, I will insist that the criminal Taryn Zel be remanded into the custody of my House's security forces. Until the Queen Mother tells me otherwise, I cannot allow a wanted felon to run free in House AlGray territory."
Zekk studied Tiraena carefully, sensing pride, smugness, victory. She was every bit the predator on the verge of pouncing, a hunter who had her prey cornered and was savoring the moment.
"Taryn Zel will remain with me at all times," Moreem countermanded. "As a member of the Royal Guard, it is my responsibility to see to the safety of the Queen Mother. Additionally, should she be guilty, any culprits she may have here might reveal themselves by acting against her. As you well know, your brother is the most likely contact she has had and warrants investigating as well."
Tiraena's lips thinned. "Very well. Guards, escort my brother to the detention center."
"What? Sister?" Zedal said in alarm.

"Zedal!" Taryn shouted at the same time.
"When it comes to matters of the Queen Mother's safety, we at House AlGray are just as serious about it," Tiraena replied coldly. "If you conspired with the Zel girl to sell state secrets, I will gladly give you to the lieutenant and rid our House of your taint."
Several of the guards at Tiraena's side used the ending of her speech to march to Zedal and Taryn and separate the two of them. With hands forcefully gripping each of a stunned Zedal's arms, they not so gently guided him out of the room.
"That is rather cold," Zekk commented. "He's your brother."
"Family and politics are one and the same," Tiraena replied, seemingly apathetic to what she had done. "If he is a liability to this house, he'll be no better than the other nobles out there, and I'll treat him just like any other enemy of House AlGray."
Taryn stiffened at Tiraena's use of words and unconsciously stepped closer to her sister.
Moreem, in the meantime, raised a single eyebrow, her face otherwise impassive. "The Royal Guard commends you on your dedication to the throne. I'll see to it that we finish this investigation as quickly and efficiently as possible."
"Do so, should you need anything merely ask one of House AlGray's serving staff. After you finish your investigation, you are more than welcome to visit any one of our luxury hotels on the Relephon Moons. We are the prime vacation getaway for the Consortium."
"Strictly business."
"Of course. I look forward to seeing you at tonight's meal at least. We wouldn't want anyone saying that House AlGray couldn't take care of its honored guests."
The landing ramp lowered, giving Zekk, Taryn, Trista, and Moreem the familiar sight of the House AlGray hangar bay located on the Relephon moon of Sapphire; an icy and mountainous moon that glowed blue from the reflected sunlight off of the gas giant swirling above .
Waiting for them was a small delegation of AlGray representatives and a security force.
"Ducha AlGray," Moreem said succinctly. "The Queen Mother expresses condolences at the loss of your Battle Dragon and the brave men and women who had been aboard."
"Your condolences are appreciated," Temperess AlGray said in a tone that was not at all friendly. "But I would not have thought the Queen Mother so insensitive as to send you and the Zels over after what transpired the last time you were here."

"We were sent over specifically because of what occurred last time," Moreem answered, her tone all business. "Our familiarity with your security procedures and the knowledge of this system will come in handy when figuring out just how a Corellian battle group was able to hide out in your territory for so long."
"House AlGray has proven time and again to be an ally to the young Queen Mother, despite her foolish ideals. We will not stand a questioning of our loyalties after everything we've sacrificed for her."
"Like last time, myself and those with me simply want to uncover the truth, no matter how horrible it may be."
"Your dedication is laudable," the Ducha said dryly. "You and your squad may have the guest quarters for the duration of your *short* stay here. You do remember where they are?"
"We'll manage, thank you for welcoming us personally," Moreem bowed politely.
The Ducha, however, simply spun on her heels and walked away. "With the formalities done, my servants will handle the rest. Do what you will."
On cue, a male Hapan stepped forward and bowed even lower than Moreem had. "House AlGray will welcome any investigation into the truth of this matter. Is there anything you or your people will require to speed up such an investigation?"
"Access to House AlGray's communication logs, access to the site where the fighting took place, and access to any sensor data you might have gathered within the past week."
"They'll be available in a little bit, captain," the male said subserviently. "In the meantime, my team and I can escort you to the guest quarters if you wish?"
"That will be appreciated," Moreem said shrewdly. "Perhaps, in the interim, you could tell us what you've heard occur during the battle."
While the serving staff picked up their bags and began to walk in stride with the group, Zekk and Taryn gravitated towards the back of the group. Out of the prying eyes of the rest of her squad, Taryn hugged Zekk's arm for a long moment. Her face was pale and she was uncharacteristically subdued as she tried to take several calming breaths. Despite the fact the breaths did little to ease the stress that was clear on her face, she stepped away from Zekk.
"You didn't have to step away, corporal," one of the others in the squad, Sergeant Hiana Roh murmured, not looking back at the two. Hiana was the soft-spoken sniper of the team, yet was also highly empathetic to the needs of the unit despite preferring to be alone.

"Everyone here knows what happened last time. We won't begrudge you some time alone with your man if you need it."
"He's not my man…yet," Taryn mumbled, her face flushing. She slipped a hand into Zekk's, looking up at him almost anxiously.
"Yet?" Zekk raised an eyebrow of amusement.
"Hapan women always get what we want," Taryn quipped with a faltering brave smile. She looked back down and squeezed his hand just a bit tighter as they left the hangar.
Letting his thumb gently caress the back of her hand reassuringly, Zekk nodded and reached out with the Force to boost her resolve. He couldn't blame her for her reaction. After the way her last trip to Sapphire ended, he was actually surprised that Tenel Ka would have her return.
They piled into a tram car, the rest of the squadron looking everywhere but at Taryn to give the red-haired warrior some semblance of privacy as she sat in the seat next to Zekk, tucked against his side. He wrapped an arm around her, continuing to comfortingly rub one of her arms in turn.
"I'll be alright," Taryn whispered softly, her eyes closing.
"You'll be alright." Zekk reinforced, keeping his focus on the beautiful young woman in his arms. He wondered if it was a side-effect of what had occurred on Denon, but he felt more in tune with her emotions than before. He could feel her hope, her fear, her sense of safety in his arms, without even trying or meaning to. He could tell she was focusing most of her thoughts on what it was like to be tucked against him rather than what it was like being on Sapphire again. Whatever it was, it strengthened his resolve to support her even more.
And as if *she* was aware of his thoughts and feelings, a small smile flickered across her face and a great deal of tension seemed to leave her shoulders.
"Have any more where you're from?" One of the other females in the squad said enviously.
"He's one of a kind, Aros" Taryn muttered, opening an eye to glower at the speaker. "Good luck looking though."
"Corporal?" Moreem questioned gently.
"I'll be good to go, sir," Taryn replied professionally. "Just using House Zel's all-purpose Jedi to gather my thoughts."
The other members of the squadron finally gave up any pretense of ignoring the two, smiling fondly as Taryn seemed to return to the Taryn they all knew.
"Definitely got to find myself a Jedi wonder-knight," the other royal guardswoman muttered.

"Wonder-knight?" Trista asked with raised eyebrows.
"Yeah, I wonder where I can find one of them," Aros replied dryly. "What with me a few years from thirty, my mother's been pestering me about maintaining the family line. Said she was going to arrange a marriage for me if I didn't at least find a consort."
"Ah, the pains of being from a noble house," Lieutenant Lovett empathized. "Don't take this the wrong way, captain, but you're lucky you're common-born. Sure you had to work like heck to get into officer's school, but at least you didn't have other families trying to sabotage you and organize the downfall of your own House."
"No, I only had to deal with incessant slurs that compared my parents to gutter-trash, and a dozen others from lesser noble houses trying to prove just why they were better than me," Moreem remarked wryly. "It was definitely fun."
"And then the first subordinates she gets are from the Royal House itself," Beyele chuckled, ever the engineer, her attention was mostly on a small device in her hands that she was fiddling with.
"Someone high up definitely had a very bad sense of humor," Moreem agreed. "But things turned out relatively alright in the end."
"Definitely relatively," Taryn said sarcastically, staring pointedly at the way Moreem was holding Trista's hand.
The two quickly yanked their hands a part, but the damage had been done. Enduring a round of good-natured ribbing and camaraderie, a pink-faced Trista and Moreem eventually pulled rank and tried to recover as much dignity as they could.
"Lieutenant Beyele, I'll leave you with third unit to investigate AlGray communications," Moreem said in a tone that instantly had the rest of her squadron at attention.
"*Anstehe, ertansida*." Beyele replied in her native tongue. Due to his Force-sensitivity, Zekk could understand her response as the equivalent of 'understood, captain.'
"Lieutenant Lovett, the second unit. You girls get to enjoy Relephon from afar. Investigate the scene of the fighting and interview the crews of the ships that survived. Keep an eye out for any more Corellians while you're at it."
"*Anstehe,*" Lieutenant Lovett saluted sharply.
"I'll take first unit and the Jedi and investigate sensor logs and interview ground-side personnel," Moreem finished. "We're only leaving if we find conclusive evidence, one way or another, of House AlGray's guilt or innocence."
The tram came to a stop in the underground station of House AlGray's Sapphire Palace. The estate was a smaller replica of the Fountain

Palace on Hapes, made up of sheets of sapphire gemstones, ice, and blue durasteel and rock. Standing high above most of the moonscape, there was no missing the gleaming blue jewel the moment you even saw the very top of it.
"Well," Taryn exhaled, detaching herself from Zekk's side as they stepped out onto the platform. The walls were lined with a weapon's exhibit; some ancient, others recent. There were gaffi sticks, tehk'la blades, Gamorean war-axes, a lanvarok, and many others. Taryn made a grimace at the memories the sight of the display invoked. Forcing a wry grin on her face, she looked up to Zekk. "Let's do this."
}-(IV)-{ }-(IV)-{
Zekk was used to traveling light and never staying in one place for too long. Although, he had to admit that House AlGray's accommodations were a far cry better than what he was normally accustomed to. The guest room was simple, yet luxurious enough to give the noble house bragging rights. Displayed wealth, but in so tasteful a way that they appeared modest. In other words, it was completely Hapan.
The blue sunlight bouncing off of Relephon streamed through an open balcony, casting half the room in shades of indigo. Yet the lighting somehow complemented the warmth of the crackling fireplace and the warm orange and yellow hues of the furnishings. The white quartzite mural floor seemed to absorb and reflect the contrasting hues, the abstract recreation of the Relephon system the mural depicted lit up in blues and oranges. The four-post bed was draped in bold orange, red, and yellow sheets—as if it were on fire—while the furniture around it were made up of natural leather or wood materials.
With an almost reluctant sigh, he sat down at the edge of the bed. The last time he had visited, he had been on Sapphire for all of a week. Until the very end of that time, he had hidden the fact that he was a Jedi and had been allocated a 'servant's' quarters due to his gender and perceived non-importance.
This was definitely a step up.
Not that he wasn't expecting this trip to be any less eventful. He seemed to take life-threatening adventures for granted now, finding something wrong when someone *wasn't* trying to kill him or someone he knew. Shaking his head and smiling ruefully at his thoughts, he plopped his travel-sack onto the bed.
He had just reached into it to pull out a couple of items when he heard a knock at the door.
"It's open, Taryn," Zekk called out wanly.
The door creaked open in the slightest and Taryn slipped into the room. She was wearing a pair of shorts and a loose top, obviously wear

meant for sleeping in. However, she also had on her utility belt which held her blaster and vibroblade, which probably wouldn't be too comfortable to fall asleep on. She clearly wasn't taking any chances with her safety in 'enemy' territory, especially after her last 'visit'.
"Hey," Zekk said gently, slightly confused by her presence. Not that he didn't appreciate it or wanted her to leave.
"The Ducha gave me the same room I was in last time," Taryn grumbled, plopping down on one of the couches in the room. "She probably knows I don't like being here anymore than she wants me here either."
"And just like last time, she's underestimating you again."
"You got that right," Taryn said with a rebellious tilt of her head. "If I could survive being framed for treason, her petty games aren't going to even make me blink."
Zekk nodded with a small smile as he began laying out an assortment of parts on the bed.
"Whatcha doing?" Taryn blinked. "Was I interrupting something Jedi-y?"
"Not really, I was just about to start," Zekk gestured to the pieces as he placed one last item down. "I lost my last lightsaber on Denon so I thought I'd create a new one. I got the parts from the Jedi Temple, just never had time to sit down and put them together after everything that's happened."
Taryn got up from where she was seated and plopped herself back down on the opposite side of the bed. She surveyed the intricate metal pieces with a puzzled expression. "So how do you put together a lightsaber then? I mean, do you need a sonic screwdriver or hydrospanner or something?"
Zekk chuckled. "Not nearly. Since ancient times, Jedi have been putting together lightsabers with the Force. It helps us create a bond to our weapon, to know its limits, its abilities, before we even activate it."
"I know the Queen Mother's uses a Rancor-tooth and a Rainbow gem. What are you making yours out of?"
"Just a regular, pre-fab 'Defender' hilt," Zekk shrugged. "Nothing fancy. I don't really have a culture or family to fall back on, or even a homeworld for that matter, so a standard lightsaber is good enough for me."
Taryn made a sound, seemingly displeased by his statement. Her fingers glided over each of the pieces, and she named some of the ones she recognized. "Energy cycling cylinders, power cell, energy mod circuits, stabilizer, power insulator…" She paused as she reached an item she didn't know.

"Emitter matrix," Zekk murmured, placing his hand on top of hers and naming the next piece for her. They paused for a moment, startling clear green eyes meeting glowing gray. Slowly, they gazed back towards the pieces, their hands gliding over the others. "Focusing lens. Blade emitter."
"Lightsaber crystal," they said in unison.
At that they both looked up at one and other and a small spark passed between them. They held each other's gazes for another long moment; Zekk's body backlit by the blue light outside, Taryn's by the crackling fireplace inside.
Swallowing nervously, Taryn was the first to look away, glancing back down at the crystal and withdrawing her hand. "What type of crystal are you using?"
"A regular Mephite," Zekk said, mimicking her whispered tone, still focused on her seated figure.
Taryn looked back up at him, scowling. "There's nothing regular about you, Zekk. Your weapon should be just as unique as you are."
"Not like I have time to go looking for rare materials," Zekk replied lightly, amusement in his voice. "Besides, Jedi are taught to accept what we are given. I don't need a fancy lightsaber to help protect others. As long as it works, it's good enough for me."
"Any crystal works for the lightsaber?"
"As long as its naturally occurring, most do," Zekk answered, not sure why she was asking.
Before he could stop her, Taryn picked up the Mephite crystal, glared at it as if it had just insulted her, and then reared back and threw it past his shoulder and out the balcony window.
"Taryn?"
In reply, Taryn reached to the chain-necklace around her neck and pulled it free. At the center of it was a pulsating rainbow gem, its colors even more vibrant in the flickering light of the fireplace. She loosened the clasps holding the crystal and held it up for Zekk to get a clear look. "Use this."
"This?"
"Trista and I have one each," Taryn said, gripping his hand and placing the crystal into his palm. "They've been passed down through our mother's side of the family for many generations, the crown jewels of House Zel so to speak."
"Taryn, I can't…" Zekk tried to hand the gem back, but she closed his hand around it and looked up at him fiercely.
"Take it, Zekk. You're House Zel's personal Jedi, so it's only fitting you have something of us to prove it."

"A gem this size? Gems this large are worth…"
"Nothing compared to your friendship, to the security you give Trista and I," Taryn hissed, her gray eyes smoldering as she kept her hand wrapped around his closed fist. "If it came down to you and these stupid gems, we'd give them up in a heartbeat. Use the gem to help you do your duty as Jedi. Then House Zel can say we did our part in making not just Hapes, but the galaxy as a whole, a better place."
"Taryn…" Zekk was speechless.
"Also," Taryn said in a smaller voice. "At least this way, some part of me will be fighting alongside you whenever you activate your blade, just like you're always there for me and Trista when we need you most."
Zekk set the gem down and pulled Taryn to him in a gentle hug. "In that case, I'll accept your gift. Thank you."
Taryn briefly returned the embrace before pulling back. "Can I watch? You know, you putting together your lightsaber?"
Zekk grinned sheepishly. "Sure, it might take a while though. I have to attune myself to each of these little pieces, your rainbow gem being the most important of them."
"Captain Espara gave our unit the rest of the night off until she's compiled a list of people to interview," Taryn made an absent gesture. "I have the time."
"It'll be a whole lot of me sitting here with my eyes closed in deep meditation."
"Then you better get started already," Taryn said playfully.
Zekk gave a mock salute. "Yes, ma'am."
He took a seat on the quartzite floor, directly on top of the representation of Relephon. With an absent gesture, the lightsaber pieces and the rainbow gem all floated over to him and were deposited all around him in a controlled descent. Looking up at Taryn, who had taken a seat on the floor in front of the bed with her bare legs pulled up to her chest, he winked. "See you in a bit."
Taryn smiled and nodded.
Zekk then released a breath and began to immerse himself in the Force. He concentrated on the little bits of technology scattered all around him, on the living gem that was soon to be the focus for his lightsaber. Rainbow gems were much like lambents in that they were living creatures, only Rainbow gems took millennia to mature and reach the size of the one Taryn had given him. This was to be the heart of his lightsaber, something that would make it different from any run-of-the-mill lightsaber crystals distributed by the Jedi Order. As he

focused on building his saber around this living, pulsating, Force presence, he began to envision the weapon as a whole.
In the meantime Taryn looked on, watching as an invisible energy caused the lightsaber pieces to float around Zekk. She studied each, sharp eyes watching as the pieces began to slowly but surely interlock with one and other. Despite not being Force sensitive, Taryn could feel a strange connection to the pieces, to Zekk, that she'd never felt before.
Almost on instinct, she snatched the standard power cell that had been floating by her and threw it off to the side. She undid the cap for the power cell of her vibrosword and let the cell join the floating objects. A brief second later, the new power cell was surrounded by other components in a seamless transition. Still not quite sure what she was doing, Taryn then pulled out her model 434 service blaster and began to field strip some of the parts. Its power insulator and energy modulation circuits soon replaced the standard pieces Zekk had brought with him, and were just as instantly incorporated into the developing lightsaber as the power cell had been.
Zekk, in his deep meditation, could only puzzle at the continuing changes he was sensing in the pieces floating around him. Just when he thought he had attuned himself to one of the basic pieces, it would suddenly be replaced by an entirely new one; one that he needed little time to adjust to. In fact, like a puzzle piece that suddenly became sharper, the new object seemed to mesh with those around it all the better. Deciding to wonder about it later, he continued his mental direction of each separate part, becoming familiar with their facets and unique signatures in the Force.
And as he built his weapon, he began to understand just why some of the parts had changed. There was another Force presence helping him construct his weapon. Small, barely tangible on any level, but definitely present. He recognized it almost immediately, and the surprise almost made him lose his concentration. Instead, though, he recovered quickly and reached out to her. He could feel the Force guiding her actions, her response even if she had no idea why she was doing what she was doing. Despite this, he felt nothing but peace from her, as if she had accepted what was happening and decided to go with the flow.
Once again his mind drifted back to the events on Denon and the strange connection he felt between the two of them. She wasn't Force-sensitive, yet somehow the Force was acting through him and directing her movements on a subconscious level. It was an odd sensation, and

he wasn't sure what to make of it. Tucking those thoughts away for another time, he turned his full attention back to the task at hand. One by one, the pieces swirled and spun, joining together on occasion as if a gravitational force was pulling them together. The rainbow gem was the next to final piece, settling firmly into the chamber that had been created for it.

After several long hours of back and forth movements, as the standard hilt of the lightsaber clicked together over the now very un-standard insides, the lightsaber was complete.

Zekk opened his eyes, green immediately seeking out gray past the lightsaber still floating in the air between them. Taryn was looking back at him, blushing but holding his gaze nonetheless. "I take it Jedi normally don't build lightsabers like that?"

"You wanted my lightsaber to be unique," Zekk quipped.

Taryn glanced at him for permission, and when he nodded, she plucked the lightsaber out of the air and examined it carefully. With a small laugh she shook her head and handed it to Zekk. "Perfect Hapan blade. Deceptive outside, complicated inside."

"Glad you approve," Zekk chuckled.

"What color will the blade be? Will it be rainbow colored like the focus?"

"Probably not," Zekk shook his head. He depressed the activator switch and to his surprise, the first color that registered in his mind was the shimmering red that emerged. Once his heart managed to find its rhythm again, he glanced at his lightsaber with a small amount of fear. The blade wasn't solely red, to his relief. The core of it was actually a shimmering white, encased in a thin shell of unstable red energy that appeared to cascade down the length of the blade like water.

Like blood, he mentally amended.

He shut off the blade and needed several deep breaths to calm himself.

"Zekk?" Taryn said worriedly.

"Sorry," Zekk tried to wave it off, but Taryn narrowed her eyes and he caved immediately. "Just…red lightsabers bring up bad memories."

At that, Taryn looked crestfallen.

"It's nothing you did," Zekk said quickly. "The saber is the sum of its parts, so for all I know, the standard pieces were the ones that created the red and your crystal gave it its white core."

"Red lightsabers, they're the weapons of dark Jedi, right?"

Zekk nodded mutely.

Taryn intuitively tilted her head. "You had a red lightsaber before." It wasn't a question, and the implied statement in her words was just as clear. *You were a dark Jedi.*
Zekk closed his eyes and nodded again.
"But that's not who you are any more," Taryn said firmly. "Just like I asked the Queen Mother to send me on this mission so I can face my demons, you need to face yours."
"I have faced them," Zekk answered softly. "It happened nearly thirteen years ago, so I've come to terms with what I did. I vowed I would never travel down that path again, nor would I let that path consume my friends."
"That's not coming to terms with it," Taryn said, her gray eyes caring. "That's avoiding it, fearing it. How often do you think about those days, when you were a dark Jedi? I think about what happened here on Sapphire almost every night before I go to sleep. A reminder, a lesson to learn and grow from."
"Dwelling on it won't make anything better," Zekk said, standing. "The past cannot be changed, you can only work towards the future."
"That's definitely the Jedi-you talking," Taryn said flatly, rising along with him. "The past makes up who you are, you can never ignore or forget it. A child who burns her hand when touching an open flame out of curiosity learns never to touch an open flame. But a child whose home burns down and loses family to that fire will forever be scarred."
"What does that have to do with…?"
"Royal Guards, especially the Elite, are taught to confront any mental blocks they may have, to push through them. It wouldn't do any good if that same child had to protect the Queen Mother and a roaring inferno was between her and her goal. That same child could have gone on to do what you did. Go on an anti-fire campaign, vow to increase fire safety and never let anyone use fire recklessly. But in the end, if confronted with that blaze, they'd still be just as scared as they were when the fire took their house and family."
"Fire is a bit different than the dark side of the Force," Zekk said defensively. "For one, the dark side is like a drug. Once you begin using it, it's very hard to stop. It corrupts everything and everyone it touches, making you forget about those you love and care for. Power, strength they become your primary goals, until the only thing that matters is gaining more of it."
Taryn took the lightsaber from Zekk's hand and activated it herself. The red-sheathed blade re-emerged, pushing back the blue light from the open balcony windows. "Would you ever consider using the dark side again?"

"Never," Zekk said coolly, taking the activated lightsaber from her and shutting it down.
"Even if it was to save my life?" Taryn raised an eyebrow.
"Taryn," Zekk narrowed his eyes, his tone indicating that the matter wasn't up for discussion.
Taryn pressed on anyways. "Would you use the dark side if myself and Trista's lives were on the line? Would you use those abilities you learned all those years ago if no other option was available."
"There's always another option."
"Zekk, Trista and I were trained to kill people in more ways than we care to count. Trained to…interrogate…suspects if they were deemed a threat to the Queen Mother. Do I despise some of the things we were taught? Yes. Will I use them, however, if necessary? Yes. We've learned skills most of the Consortium will never know, might frown upon, and yet we'd be remiss if we simply let that knowledge fade away for fear of what *might* happen. You've learned something few Jedi have the guts to learn, yet instead of using those abilities for good, to help better the galaxy, you're keeping them locked away because you got burned in the past."
"Taryn, like I said, you don't understand the Force, so you can't possibly understand how dangerous the dark side truly is," Zekk hissed. "Greater men then me have tried to walk the line."
"You're scared," Taryn almost taunted, stepping up toe to toe with Zekk. "Scared of what can happen. Scared that you'll like using the dark side again."
"I am," Zekk replied icily. "And I am not afraid to admit it. Only a fool wouldn't be scared of the power of the dark side. Double the fool who knows of the power and thinks they can use it without succumbing to its temptations. Don't talk about something you know nothing about."
Taryn recoiled as if struck, her gray eyes turning stormy. "Fine, continue lying to yourself, continue thinking you've gotten over what happened thirteen years ago. It's clear you haven't. In the meantime, I'm going back to my room. I may be scared of it, of what this place represents, but I won't let those fears beat me. I came back to this accursed place because I knew just how badly it'd mess me up. When are you going to go back to those days and confront them head on?"
Taryn spun on her heels and walked with an almost lethal calm back out of the room.
With her gone, Zekk released a breath and let out a groan. He was so distracted but what had just happened, he didn't even hear the sound of someone clapping for a whole two seconds. When the sounds registered, he whirled towards the balcony.

"Well, you definitely made a mess of that, Zekky. She's right you know, you denying that part of yourself is like blinding yourself to half of the Force. If I wanted to, I could have killed the both of you before you even knew I was here."
Zekk's eyes widened and his jaw dropped as a familiar Twi'lek sauntered into the room. She seemed to practically disappear in the shadows and blue light. There was no mistaking who she was, however. "Alema!?"
}-(Chapter End)-{

Corellia
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The decision for Corellia to go to war on Hapes had stirred up all sorts of trouble. Trouble Jysella was definitely not accustomed to. It was a part of the reason why she was currently spending the rest of the day after that fateful decision storming through the capitol looking for one of the primary culprits to the current situation. Tracking Alema down with the Force was a lot harder to do than said. For one, Alema was near undetectable, could be invisible even, in the Force. Two, the countless security checkpoints ate up valuable time and whenever Jysella had reached one location, Alema had already moved on.
So it was with great relief that, towards the end of the day, she reached out with the Force and sensed the Twi'lek in a nearby room. The office of Corellian Admiral Genna Delpin to be exact. Making her own Force presence small, Jysella silently approached the office. The heavy wooden door was slightly ajar, and she could just make out the conversation occurring within.
"I understand that's what we agreed on, but even you can see that the Prime Minister isn't a war leader. She was elected for her political smarts, not her military genius. You, on the other hand, are a veteran of the Vong War. You know what it takes to get the job done."
"What you are suggesting is that I betray the Prime Minister."
"What I'm suggesting is that you take the steps required to preserve as much Corellian lives as possible. This Heritage Council wants the throne, they can have it, I couldn't care less. But what I despise is the fact that they want to manipulate us into gaining it. I was under the impression *you* were in charge of Corellia's armed forces, so why are we going to have Duchas and spoiled nobles directing us? My way things stay small, contained, no risk of another government butting in. And no risk of Corellian lives being lost in something they shouldn't be interfering with anyways."
"And you said Minister Willems and Lemora are on board?"

"After I pointed out the benefits, yes. All we have to do is *appear* to be helping the Heritage Council, let chaos run its course, and we'll benefit when the Queen Mother steps down. Ministers Willems and Lemora agreed to talk to the senators of Corellia's allied systems and are pretty sure most of them will be on board too. The fact they won't have to do much but make political statements is definitely a plus."
"And has the Heritage Council agreed?"
"I'll be seeing them first thing when I travel to Hapes."
"Very well, provided you obtain their consent, I'll agree. Corellia will publicly acknowledge the Heritage Council and their allies as the true representatives of Hapes. Whether they actually survive or not in the ensuing Hapan civil war is none of our concern."
"Right, none of your concern. Well, admiral, it's been good talking with you. See ya around," Alema sauntered out the doorway looking like a nexu that had had her fill. "Sella! Hey, what're you doing here? I would have thought you were going with the rest of your family on those troop transports to the fleet."
"Never mind what I'm doing here. What are *you* doing, here?" Jysella gestured to the office with wide eyes.
Admiral Delpin emerged from the room. "Alema Rar, is there a problem?"
"No problem," Alema said with a jaunty wave of her hand. "Go back to your office and continue planning the offensive. Make sure to close the door behind you."
The admiral blinked slowly, then nodded and returned to her office without protest. Jysella could only gape at the blatant abuse of the Force and the conversation she had overheard.
"Alema, what are you doing?" Jysella finally managed.
"What I do best," Alema answered slyly. "Walk with me, Sella. My transport leaves in a couple of hours but I have some place I have to go first."
"I thought the other Jedi Masters and the ministers had agreed on a quick removal of the Queen Mother and an even faster transition," Jysella hissed as a group of politicians passed them. "So what are you doing now?"
"Listen, Sella. Let's say we go with their plan, let's say Tenel Ka somehow retains the throne. Her enemies will simply slink back into the shadows and pop up again when she can least afford it. This way, I'm going to shine a great big floodlight on them, attach holo signs to their heads, and make it impossible to dig their way out. The way you and the other Jedi wanted, the battle lines were murky, friends could be foes. My way, I'm driving a clear line in the ground. There will be

those against Tenel Ka, and those with her. Once that line is drawn, we'll see where everyone falls."
At the almost gleeful way Alema was explaining her reasoning, Jysella shuddered. "Your way, thousands of people will die. It's a civil war."
"Exactly! A *civil* war, between Hapans. No need for the Corellians to stick their big noses into it. So what if thousands of Hapans die? Bad blood needs to be spilled sooner than later. When the dust settles, Hapes will be even stronger than before. Who knows, maybe the two sides will weaken each other to the point where they *both* have to call a truce and join together."
"Alema!" Jysella snapped. "The deaths of so many people is nothing to laugh about!"
"Trillions died in the Vong War. I laugh about it because of how pointless that war was," Alema countered. "My sister, dead. My master, dead. Ganner, dead. All those trillions of people, dead. Why? Because a group of other-galaxy nomads were being led by a madman and wanted to create a home by blowing up a galaxy they could have settled in peacefully had they asked. Besides, you're a Jedi. Don't you believe in the fact that there's no death, only the Force? If it helps, think of those who will die in the civil war as simply returning to the Force."
"You've changed," Jysella noted, barely succeeding in regaining control of her emotions.
"You too. But I guess having your dad spout Jedi-wisdom at you for the better part of the last eight years would do that to you." Alema said 'Jedi' almost sarcastically. "Look, right now Hapes is divided. I doubt even Tenel Ka knows how bad it's become. Those cracks in their society are nothing but tools opportunistic businessmen can exploit. Removing Tenel Ka from power will not solve anything in the long run. Tearing open those cracks before anything more can be built on top of it, however, will save us a lot of headaches in the future. People will die, yes. But who's to say they wouldn't have died later on when the foundation built upon those cracks finally breaks?"
Jysella swallowed bitterly, glaring at the Twi'lek. "Is this what you meant a few days ago when you said my father or myself wouldn't understand the things you face?"
"Exactly what I meant. Sometimes a sacrifice is needed for the greater good," Alema said in a silently, bone-chilling tone. "Most of the Jedi are too scared to put that burden on their shoulders. When things become ugly, they look the other way, or slap a fresh coat of paint over it and declare the problem fixed. That's what keeps them from truly being

able to keep the peace in this wretched galaxy. What keeps them from making an actual difference."
Her statement stunned Jysella into silence, and they boarded a taxi in front of the capitol building in near silence.
"Refugee Camp Twenty-Three, sector one-three-seven," Alema directed the droid pilot.
"Refugee camp?" Jysella looked to the Twi'lek questioningly. Alema, however, didn't respond.
The streets of Coronet seemed to go by in a rush, Jysella still trying to catch up with the wild direction the past few days had taken her. Given the fact that she continued to be pin-balled by one event after another, she doubted she'd be able to catch up any time soon. All too quickly they left the city proper and began to approach a heavily fenced off area on the outskirts of the city.
"This is as far as I am allowed to take you."The droid announced just outside a heavily-protected checkpoint.
"That's fine, thanks," Alema swiped her credit-chit and slid out of the speeder.
Together, Jysella and Alema approached the guards manning the checkpoint. Large duracrete barriers and a chain-linked fence divided a crowded, tent-filled region from the rest of Corellia. Several armed guards stood watch over a single entrance, their eyes scanning the line of people awaiting entry.
"Hold it," one of the guards held up his gun as Alema and Jysella approached.
"Jedi business," Alema jerked her finger at Jysella. "Go about your business, soldier-boy."
Eyes darted to Jysella's Jedi robes, and the guard nodded. "Alright, go ahead. We've had no problems here, though."
"Good to hear," Alema said with a forced smile.
"Camp Twenty-Three, huh?" Jysella murmured as they stepped pass the gate. "I've never been to this one."
"Understandable. Out of the seventy in system, this is one of the most stable," Alema said. "They have utilities, a police force, and are even starting to grow their own food. Nice place, good people."
"Why are we here?"
"You want to know the downside to being so willing to sacrifice some for the many?" Was Alema's non-answer. "Does hell to my complexion. Makes me forget that there are sometimes things I won't sacrifice for any reason."
Rather than ask another question, Jysella fell silent and followed Alema through a maze of tents and pre-fab structures. She was surprised to

see some of the refugees smile or nod at Alema as they passed, paying little attention to her in turn. It was something she definitely wasn't used to. Jedi were always in high demand, couldn't go through a refugee camp without at least one person coming up to them with one complaint or another.
"You've been here before?"
"I've been on Corellia for almost a year now. Part of a refugee group fleeing the Tion mess," Alema said casually. "Where do you think I was living all that time?"
Eventually, the two women came to a larger pre-fab shelter. It looked the same as any of the other shelters around it save for the fact it had two stories instead of one. An older woman, wearing a heavy shawl and ragged clothing, sat in a chair at the doorway. Face partially hidden, the older woman looked up at their approach and took one look at Alema before chuckling softly.
"You're back again, huh?" The old woman spoke with a raspy voice, yet carried herself with a strength that belayed her age.
"Probably the last time in a long while," Alema replied evenly.
The old woman glanced at Jysella for a moment, then to Alema. "So, you've rejoined the Jedi?"
"Temporary thing," Alema said. "A necessary thing."
"Indeed, the children will miss you."
"They'll live. Souls that young always find some way to survive, no matter the hell they're in," Alema answered, her face emotionless. "Are they in?"
"I'll fetch them for you." The old woman stood and disappeared into the building. A few moments later, five children emerged, the oldest seemingly around eleven or twelve years of age.
Upon seeing Alema, a red-haired girl with gold eyes broke ranks and ran to the Twi'lek, wrapping her arms around the taller woman's legs. The action was made in complete silence, the atmosphere somehow becoming tense and desperate all at the same time.
The red-haired girl was the only one to greet Alema in that manner, however, as the others simply looked at Alema with some amount of anxiety.
The puzzling response had Jysella instantly reach out through the Force to determine just what was causing the reaction. One thing Jysella immediately realized was that the girl hugging Alema was Force sensitive, and that she had developed some sort of bond with the Twi'lek.
All at once, a memory of sorts came to her.

A hallway. Scorch marks along once pristine stone walls. Bodies in a trail behind her. Slowly, gleefully, she stalks her prey. It's a man and woman, both completely terrified, stumbling, crying, as they push their way into a bedroom.
There's no rush. She savors the fear, the terror, casually rounding the corner.
"*Time to die," she says with a smile.*
"*Please! Why are you doing this? We've never hurt anyone! We're just housekeepers!"*
"*You're going to die because you're weak," she replies in a cold, almost detached voice. "A new future is coming, one neither of you have a place in. Your employer stands in the way of that future, thus you do as well."*
With a gesture, the male is lifted into the air. She leaps, a single lightsaber activating for a fraction of a second. The man's body falls to the floor in two, his wife emitting a terrified whimper.
"*Your turn."*
"*Mommy!" A voice cries out from the open doorway.*
"*No! Lyda, run away!" The woman screams in desperation, seconds before her head is removed from her body. She never saw the blade coming.*
The child who had called out is frozen in place, golden eyes dilated and breathing shallow.
Jysella could feel herself raise her lightsaber again despite her best attempts to stop the nightmare from unfolding.
Suddenly, the clouds outside one of the windows shifts, allowing pale beams of moonlight to filter into the room. She catches a glimpse of herself in one of the full-length mirrors attached to the bedroom door. It's only then that she stops. Yellow eyes, full of malice, of cruelty, stare back at her. Skin, darkened, veined, a reflection so alien to her that the shock causes her to gasp. The hand gripping the lightsaber begins to shake, and as it does, she becomes aware of the little girl murmuring a litany of pleas.
"*Don't hurt me. Please go away. Please, I don't want to die."*
Jysella could feel her stomach twist in knots, her heart temporarily skipping a beat as she turns her gaze back to her reflection. Her hand still shaking uncontrollably, she sheaths her lightsaber and glances past the girl to the trail of death she had left behind.
What had she become?
"You all doing well?" Alema asked, running a hand through the hair of the young girl hugging her. At the same time, however, Alema nodded ever so slightly in Jysella's direction, a pained expression breaking

through for the slightest of moments. "I'm going to be going away for a little bit, but I'll be back soon."
The group continued to eye Alema, none of them saying anything. Alema detached the young girl at her side and knelt down so she was eye-level. "Lyda Rae, you're doing a good job taking care of the others. Keep up the good work."
The red-haired girl nodded and stepped back with the rest.
"Go back inside and finish your meal, now," Alema gestured. "Behave for Lady Sani, 'kay?"
They shuffled back into the building, none of them saying a single word during the entire encounter. Alema and the older woman shared a singular nod, before the raspy-voiced woman likewise retreated back into the building.
"Those were children from that intelligence analyst's house, weren't they?" Jysella whispered, reaching out to Alema in the Force, only to be rebuffed. "The one you told me about."
"I did say no one was left alive inside," Alema confirmed, gesturing for Jysella to walk alongside her. "I couldn't save the others, though. My business associate had too much fun and kind of went crazy."
"What happened to him?"
"Tripped on some stairs, fell down, and impaled himself with his own lightsaber and broke his neck," Alema said glibly. "Those poor kids though. Most of them are too traumatize, won't say another word. Lyda, you saw it right? She was the one who pleaded for her life after I killed her parents. Still have no clue why she'd attach herself to me like that. Stupid Force bond."
"What do you mean?"
"I get hurt, she feels it," Alema grumbled. "It's why I decided to come to take a small vacation here on Corellia. Job hazards meant that I'd only get her killed if something happened to me."
"She can come to the Jedi Prax…"
"Never," Alema said sharply. "If she ever wants to become a Jedi, she can make the choice to do so when she gets older."
"But if she has the potential…"
"She should use it? For what? She's a kid right now. It's my fault her parents are dead and that her childhood is shot to pieces. She may not have much of a life in this camp, but it's better than any life you Jedi can give her."
"So you're teaching her about the basics and everything?"
"Me, a friend or two," Alema confirmed cryptically.
Jysella stared at Alema analytically. The more she knew about the Twi'lek, the more she could see just how much the seven years had

changed her. Alema was practically a walking contradiction, existing in neither the 'good' category or the 'bad'. There was the 'good' as Alema saw it, and the 'bad' that needed fixing.
"You're scared of me now, aren't you?" Alema said conversationally. "Or either that, you don't know what to make of me."
"More of the latter, some of the former."
"It's understandable. I'm scared of what I'm becoming too," Alema continued off-handedly. "Worried that when it all ends for me I'll be seen by what I've done and not what I've tried to do."
"'When it all ends'?"
Alema offered a faint smirk. "I expect I'll be very much dead before the next great war is over. And I don't mean the one with Corellia and Hapes."
"Alema…"
"Cheer up, that war's still a couple years away. My bosses don't like unknowns so they're waiting for this situation to be resolved first."
"Your bosses will start a war?"
"They're kind of crazy like that," Alema said with a cheerful smile. They exited the camp, walking along a vacant dirt road leading back to the main city. "You know the 'We must burn the galaxy to make it anew, a galaxy in our image, so that all the injustices will be righted,' types of people."
Jysella froze in place, a clenching feeling in her stomach keeping her feet rooted to the ground. Alema likewise stopped, though she was a couple steps in front of the human Jedi. The Twi'lek smiled ruefully and glanced over her shoulder.
"I said too much, didn't I?" Alema murmured. "Keep forgetting you're the daughter of one of the smarter Jedi Masters in the order."
"Your bosses…they're dark Jedi, aren't they?" Jysella said in a whisper. She could feel her heart hammering against her chest as Alema nodded once.
"Sith lords and ladies, actually," Alema answered idly. "They've quite the army by now."
"You have to tell my dad, the other Jedi."
"Tell them what? They can't do anything now, not with the galaxy in the shape it's in."
"But they need to prepare, at least…" Jysella stopped when the silvery tip of one of Alema's lightsabers extended to mere millimeters from her throat.
"You do that and my bosses will go so deep underground that you won't ever be able to find them. They'll disappear and reappear when the galaxy is at its weakest, probably when we're all long dead and

gone. Despite their egos, they aren't stupid people. If they even feel the slightest tremor in the Force that the Jedi are aware of their existence, they'll stay hidden, let the Order wear itself out chasing shadows in the night."
"Then why tell me!" Jysella snapped. "I know *you're* not that careless, Alema. You knew I'd make the connection."
"Me being selfish I guess," Alema shrugged, deactivating her lightsaber and hooking it back on her belt. "Did some thinking after what you told me the other night. It does feel kind of better to know that I'm not the only one who knows. That if I'm volunteered to rejoin the Force, someone else can at least continue where I left off. You did want some of my burdens, right?"
Jysella clenched her jaw, and then glanced towards the afternoon sun. "Can I at least tell Val?"
"If you want to," Alema answered. "Like I said, the more people who know, the more likely it is for the Sith to just disappear."
The younger woman absorbed the statement silently. She then glanced back to Alema sharply. "The destabilization of the Outer Rim, the rising crime…"
"We only latched onto it once things started falling apart," Alema shook her head. "You know we thrive on chaos and discord, but we weren't the ones who initiated things. It's why my bosses grew alarmed when things began straying away from their plans. You know Sith, when it comes to controlling things, they're almost neurotic."
"So you're telling me that there's another group of people out there capable of causing so much trouble in the galaxy, and even if we find them, we'll still have your …friends… to deal with afterwards?"
"Pretty much," Alema answered. "Now you see why I'll probably be dead in the next decade?"
"That's not going to happen," Jysella growled.
"Don't get me wrong. Numa would kick my butt if I died any time soon. But the odds don't look all that great for me."
"Alema," Jysella reached out to touch the scarred right shoulder of the Twi'lek. "You're on Corellia. You know what we do to odds. We eat 'em for breakfast."
"What are you going to do? Join me in some grand adventure infiltrating the Sith?" Alema chuckled fondly, letting a thumb brush across Jysella's cheek. "Jysella, don't…"
"Yes."
"What?"
"Yes," Jysella repeated. "I'll join you. Dad always taught me and Val that undercover officers worked in pairs, partners. They watched each

others' backs and kept the other from falling off the deep end. So what if I can't tell anyone. I'm going to make damned sure that as many people survive when your bosses finally decide to act."
"Even if you can only save those on Corellia?"
"They'd be lives who probably would have died if I didn't act." Then, in light of the new information, Jysella tilted her head at Alema. "That's why you wanted the Corellian Praxeum declare itself separate from the rest of the Order. Why you're trying to keep Corellia out of a war with Hapes and why you're trying to get Tenel Ka's enemies to reveal themselves. You're trying to save as many of our friends as you can. Set the stage for when your bosses do come."
"Guilty as charged. You really are scary smart, Jysella. You've spent the past several years well."
"I was put in charge of public relations and was acting as the praxeum's political liaison," Jysella answered. "Had to learn how to think fast and make connections. Helps that my family's always been good at the mind-stuff."
Alema bit her bottom lip and looked away. "Jysella. I still don't…"
"Then you never should have told me."
"Are you sure?"
"It's not like I'll be joining the Sith or anything," Jysella said calmly. "You can tell your bosses you found a naïve little Jedi you can manipulate, and I'll be your link back to the Jedi when the time comes."
"No, they'd probably ask to meet you, and then kill you when you no longer were of any use. Sith don't value idiots and those easily manipulated," Alema disagreed immediately. "If you're doing this, you'll have to become my apprentice. Only then will I be able to protect you from most of the stuff you might otherwise be forced to do."
"I'll be teaming up with you, not joining the Sith," Jysella clarified.
"Look at it however will make you sleep better at night," Alema replied coldly. "But if you're going to do this, just like the Corellian Praxeum splitting from the rest of the Order, you'll have to be all-in. No doubts, no fear, no hesitation. "
Jysella released a long breath and then nodded once. "We Horns see things through to the end."
Alema closed her eyes, a surge of emotional pain escaping tightly controlled barriers. Finally, she forced a cheery smile. "Great. Welcome aboard. Worry about the Sith later, though. First we have the Corellians, Hapans, and other fools who will no doubt get involved, to deal with."

"In other words, just a regular day as a Jedi," Jysella said fondly. Mentally, she cursed the day for launching even more curve balls at her before she could handle the ones that had been thrown previously. "We definitely don't lead uncomplicated, boring lives."
Alema winked at Jysella, no doubt sensing her inner turmoil. "True, where would the fun be in that?"
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"*The Queen Mother has returned to Hapes to give birth to her child,*" Ducha Temperess AlGray reported. "*It is said she is using her Jedi sorcery to ensure that the child will be born tomorrow. We have that long to plan and move our forces into position. Because of this, our meeting must be accelerated."*
"Understood," Twenty-three year old Jedi Knight and Corellian Defense Force Major, Valin Horn said. "The Jedi of the Corellian Praxeum are currently embedded in a Corellian strikeforce en route to the Relephon system. We're two hours out."
"*When you arrive, you will immediately meet with the Heritage Council for our final stage of planning. In order to make use of your unique talents efficiently, and to minimize loss of life, we need to be sure of where our two sides stand."*
"Begging your pardon, Ducha, but is it not risky to have the Heritage Council in one place on the eve of setting our plans into motion?"
"We have no choice. In the run up to the birth of the chume'da, the Royal Intelligence Service has increased their scrutiny on inter-system communications. Hypercomm and holocom meetings are more susceptible to interception. Face-to-face is the only reliable way we can avoid their prying eyes and ears. Besides, everyone on the Heritage Council is devoted to ushering in a new future for Hapes, will give our lives for it if we have to. Change cannot come without risk after all."
"If you are so dedicated, then we will proceed as you have planned," Valin said professionally. "Corellia and her Jedi are willing to let the Heritage Council take the lead in this endeavor. The fate of the Consortium should be decided by Hapans."
"Wise words, young Jedi. Peace will be achieved by your brave decision to help, there is no doubt about that. We of the Heritage Council look forward to your arrival." The communication-link was terminated, and the standard chatter that normally filled a capital ship bridge took its place.
"Peace," Valin scoffed, gazing out the window of the bridge. He was on a Corellian Dreadnaught, the flagship of a small armada en route to the Consortium, grimacingly-named the *Halcyon.* It was supposed to be an allusion to peaceful times, tranquility; though he doubted that peace

and tranquility ever needed more turbolaser batteries than an *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer. Nor did it need a fleet of twenty capital ships and support vessels from Corellia and her allied systems.
He also didn't miss the obvious symbolic link the ship's name had to his family's past. Leave it to the spawn of the Halcyon family line to break ranks with traditional Jedi teaching and actually wage war in the name of Corellia.
"Some peace," Jysella said, echoing his thoughts. She stepped up to his side like a shadow.
"Get the feeling we're about to make a big mistake?" Valin said softly. A brief use of Force kept the rest of the bridge crew ignorant of their presences. "That we're being herded towards this chain of events by some unseen hand?"
"Yeah," Jysella agreed. "But what can we do? It's not like we can ask the universe to hold up for a moment while we figure out what's going on."
"It just *feels* wrong," Valin rubbed at the scar across the bridge of his nose. "Like even if we're doing this with the best of intentions, the Force is warning us against it anyways. Remove one Jedi from power, save millions, right?"
Jysella's answer was silence. Being two siblings of a power mind-manipulating family, Valin instantly picked up on the guilt.
"Sella?"
"It's nothing."
"Not nothing," Valin's expression tightened. "Walk with me."
"I'm not a little girl any more, Val." Jysella fell in line anyways
"You're still my little sister," Valin retorted sharply.
"So what, you're going to tell dad?" Jysella said sarcastically, following him out of the bridge and into a turbolift.
"Whatever it is, it has to do with that Twi'lek, doesn't it?"
"Her name is Alema."
"Her name is 'bad news'," Valin snapped. "I know you've seen the ravages of the dark side on her body. Felt how different she is in the Force compared to eight years ago. You're not blind or stupid. So what are you doing listening to a word she says, much less going along with her? She's changed, Sella."
"We all have!" Jysella hissed, jabbing his shoulder with a finger. The turbolift doors opened and they stormed out at a brisk pace. "You'd be the last person I thought would judge someone by their appearances. There's good in her, a whole lot more than most people."
"She's messing with your mind," Valin said, trying to control his emotions. "You heard her list her activities for the Corellian

interrogators. She's killed innocents, preyed upon the weak, manipulated people into harming one and other. How were any of those actions good? Why do you keep defending her when it's clear the Alema she once was doesn't exist anymore?"
"You wouldn't understand," Jysella said with narrowed eyes. She pounded the door-control, and a massive sparring room opened up before them.
"Then make me understand," Valin snapped. "The last thing dad or I want is for you to go dark because you believe you're doing the right thing."
"Then what are we doing now?" Jysella countered, moving to the opposite end of the room. "We're going to help the Corellians depose a friend of the Jedi Order, help usurpers take her place, all in the name of doing the right thing! Of finding the truth!"
"You heard dad. Even if we didn't help out, a coup would have occurred without our participation. And quit trying to change the topic."
"Quit treating me as if I'm some sort of little girl. I know what I'm doing, Valin."
Valin unclipped his lightsaber from his belt. It was very unlike the single-bladed weapon he had used during the Yuuzhan Vong War, the basic lightsaber he had made at the Shelter. Instead, electrum, cobalt, and opal inlays were integrated into the hilt, with a unique set of crystals acting as the focus. The materials had been provided by Corellia's government, eager to put their 'stamp of approval' on 'their' Jedi. "Do you? Because the Jysella I knew wouldn't feel guilty about actually saving lives."
Jysella's expression darkened. "You'd really think I'd be okay with letting someone die? Valin, as powerful as we are, we can't save everyone. Even if we remove Tenel Ka from power, what good will that do to all those who supported her? Do you really think the Heritage Council is going to let them live, to remain a threat to their power? It'll be a slaughter of the royalists, a slaughter we'll have sanctioned by helping the Heritage Council with their coup. If we do things Alema's way, at least those people will have a fighting chance. They might actually win. The Valin I knew would have trusted me on this, wouldn't have assumed I'd take millions of lives so lightly."
"Jysella." Valin said warningly, his back towards her.
"Before the Vong War you were laid back, gentle," Jysella pushed on. "When you took on Tiu Zax as your apprentice, I saw hints of that old Valin again. But you've definitely changed too, so you're in no position to be talking down to me."

"I know what it's like to be burned by someone you thought was a friend!" Valin hissed, spinning back around. "To be so blind to hope and the things the Jedi Order preaches that you can't see the reality staring you in the face."
"Don't you dare compare Alema to that Vong you befriended in the Remnant," Jysella snapped, pulling out her own lightsaber. "She's doing what she's doing by choice. Not because she's stupid enough to listen to nonsensical orders."
Lightsabers on either side of the room activated, Valin's emerald green blade pushing against Jysella's flaming yellow. The few people who had been training in the room ceded the floor to the two Horn siblings and looked on in nervous anticipation.
"I can take care of myself, big brother," Jysella said, now it was her turn to be the calm one. "Let me show you."
Jysella launched herself through the air, her amber-shaded blade a blur. Valin met her with a leap of his own, their sabers clashing several times before they both landed back on the ground. No time was wasted, and the two immediately re-engaged, the difference in their fighting styles immediately apparent; even to the untrained eye.
"Still using that modified Vong-fighting technique you learned from Tahiri's holocron, huh?" Jysella remarked, a small smirk on her face as she blocked a Yuuzhan Vong amphistaff-inspired saber thrust. "That says a lot."
"To know how your enemy fights is to know your enemy," Valin retorted, batting aside her light and fast jabs with authoritative sweeps of his lightsaber.
"And I know how Alema fights," Jysella arched herself backwards to let Valin's green blade pass over her. She then whipped her body around and to the side, her saber following her every movement, burning it into the air like a ribbon of light. She spun and pivoted, dancing around the powerful strikes of her brother. "I know her. You're not even trying to understand what she's doing."
"What's there to understand? If she wanted to, she could have returned to the Jedi Order any time, but she didn't." Valin body-checked his sister, catching her off-balance and sending her sprawling. With a guttural yell he lunged with his lightsaber, but Jysella had rolled with her momentum and popped back up a safe distance away.
"Return to what?"Jysella was bouncing on the balls of her feet now, her shoulders bobbing up and down as she began to circle her brother.
"We would have put her on trial."
"We would have uncovered the truth."

"Like we're doing now with Hapes and Corellia?" Jysella said as their argument circled back to their initial quandary. She launched a series of lightning fast thrusts that seemed to come from all directions as she infused the Force into each attack. "The Jedi Order doesn't have all the answers." She punctuated each word with a lightning-quick strike.
With a bold spin of his lightsaber, Valin knocked all of her attacks aside. Before she could recover, he reached out with his free hand and grabbed her wrist. Her lightsaber died away, leaving her staring defiantly at Valin's green blade. "Neither does Alema."
Jysella contorted herself and her arm, twisting herself free of Valin's grip. "The Jedi Order's ways haven't been working for the past five years. We need a new plan."
"And following the advice of someone who's obviously spent time with dark Jedi is a better idea?" Valin said incredulously, shutting off his saber. "Sella, listen to yourself. Do you really see the Hapan people as someone we can just 'sacrifice' because they'd 'just die anyways'? That it really is better to have millions killed in a civil war over the removal of one Jedi? Think about it, Sella. I know you're smart, you've got mom's brains. Spend some time away from your Twi'lek friend and just *think* about whatever it is she's told you. I'm not saying our current course of action is the best one, but I know it's probably loads better than whatever that Twi'lek has planned."
"Fine," Jysella said with a jerk of her head. "I'll do that. But if I decide to go along with what she has planned?"
"Then you'll do it regardless of what I say," Valin said. "At least I tried though."
"Why won't you give her a chance?" Jysella frowned.
"I am. I'm giving her a chance to prove me right."
"And you say Alema's the one that's changed," Jysella said snidely, hooking her lightsaber to her belt. "I'm going to get dressed for the meeting with the Heritage Council. Let me know when we've arrived."
}-(III)-{ }-(III)-{
"Six noble houses make up the Heritage Council: AlGray, Aros, Chell, Galney, Gheer, Thane," Jysella recited under her breath as their shuttle descended through the thin atmosphere of House AlGray's primary moon, Sapphire.
Called *Saf'raire* in the native Hapan tongue, the Heaven's Mirror, the azure-hued celestial body loomed ever larger, framed by the gas giant behind it. For all their humanoid appearances it was really easy to forget that Hapans were officially a 'near-human' species, with their own culture and language. In fact, before the Empire made contact with them, they had been isolated from the rest of the galaxy for

millennia. Only the elite and diplomatic corps were capable of speaking Basic, and even then, most of the Consortium had yet to actually meet anyone from the greater galaxy.
"Nervous, Jedi Knight Horn?" The lone Jedi Apprentice in the team, nine-year old Selonian Shrona Ruluwoor, asked sagely.
"That obvious?" Jysella said with a faint smile. "This is important stuff going on. Any amount of points we can win with the Hapans will matter."
"Then maybe you should say '*Ta'e erenada,*'" Shrona read off a datapad. "It means, 'Eternity to she who has no equal'. It's normally used to greet the Queen Mother during her trips to the rest of the Consortium."
"Natua gave you that datapad?" Jysella smiled, glancing briefly to where the Falleen Jedi was talking with several others from the Corellian Praxeum.
Shrona's polecat head bobbed as she nodded and held the datapad up for Jysella to see. "My master said that I should learn about the people we are visiting. That their den and ways were different from Corellia's and that we can only truly understand what is happening here by becoming Hapan instead of Corellian or Jedi."
Feeling like some sort of lizard-monkey, Jysella blinked. "Become Hapan?"
"Uh huh. This is a Hapan problem," Shrona said. "Hapan problems can only be solved by Hapans. Trying to solve a Hapan problem as a Jedi or Corellian will only make things more difficult and complicated. Because then it will be a Hapan-Jedi-Corellian problem. At least that's what my master said."
"Square peg, round slot, huh," Jysella said ruefully. "Natua definitely makes some sense."
"She's smart," Shrona said worshipfully.
"Yup," Jysella narrowed her gaze at the Falleen. "Considering she practically jumped at the chance to have Corellia go to war with Hapes, she has to have seen something the rest of us didn't."
The rest of the shuttle trip passed quickly, light conversation covering for the fact that its occupants were about to undergo a possibly history-changing meeting with a band of coup-plotters. Rather than dock at Sapphire's primary spaceport, the shuttle bypassed it and headed towards the almost prism-like palatial structure that was House AlGray's headquarters and home.
Situated high on a rocky crag, much like the Fountain Palace on Hapes, the home of the AlGrays was every bit as extravagant and luxurious as its Hapan counterpart. The shuttle did a single fly-by of the sprawling

compound, before coming around to the back of the rocky crag. A wall of rock retracted, revealing a secret landing pad behind it. The shuttle continued on, the wall of rock closing behind it.
"Looks like they've brought out everyone to greet us," Valin noted, staring at the gathered crowd through the shuttle's viewport.
"Great, the heads of all the families we're working with," Jysella said, unable to keep the nervousness from her voice.
"Of course they would be here to greet us," Natua commented with a touch of un-Natua airiness and squared shoulders. Question glances were sent in her direction, and she raised her eyebrow crest in response. "We are the key to their power. It would behoove them to get on our good side."
Shrona copied Natua's superior tilt of her head, looking every bit as confident as her master.
"Please don't go anti-Falleen all the sudden. It's more than scary when you do that," Jysella laughed.
"For a moment, I almost fell for it," Valin likewise chuckled. "Come on, let's see what the stuffed shirts have for us this time."
As the Horns continued on to the airlock, both Shrona and Natua shared secretive high-fives and fell in line. Alema and several Corellians completed their delegation, bringing the number in their party to ten.
"Admiral," Alema said to Corellian ranking officer accompanying them, Admiral Vara Karathas. "Put any thought to the matter I brought up? Delpin, Lemora, and Willems are already onboard."
"Unlike their fickle attitudes, my loyalty is to Corellia, not some Twi'lek outsider," the gray-haired woman relied coolly. "Prime Minister Saxan agreed to our current plan, so that is what we will do."
Alema smiled coldly. "A pity then."
"A threat?"
"Oh, no," Alema said, her smile seemingly frozen on her face. "Just a pity that you're so willing to sacrifice Corellian lives for a matter that has nothing to do with Corellia at all."
"Practice your silver tongue elsewhere," Admiral Karathas rebuked. "The Five Worlds Council and her allies agreed that the sacrifice was worth the eventual benefits. We'd be helping not just Hapes, but the many worlds she can give her resources too."
"Like I said, a pity."
The hatch to the shuttle lowered, and a band began playing a rousing welcoming tune. Several rows of security personnel, arrayed on either side of an azure carpet, snapped to attention, saluting sharply as the Jedi and Corellians descended from their ship.

"What a way to feel welcomed," Jysella murmured, the rousing music continuing, the beat seemingly matching their measured footfalls.
"Notice how the nobles are having us walk to them and not the other way around?" Natua whispered, her lips barely moving. "They're still trying to cling to some semblance that they're in control."
"Going to do something about that, Natua?" Valin said, his voice likewise barely audible as they grew nearer to the gathering of nobles.
"Of course, do you mind of Shrona and I take the lead, Valin?" Natua asked.
"Be my guest," Valin nodded once.
"Mind if I tag along?" Alema said, fast-walking her way to the front of the formation.
"Not at all," Natua said, before Valin could object.
Alema glanced at Natua for a long moment, then smirked. "Rhysode really did a good job with you."
"He is still with me in the Force," Natua replied smoothly, her voice the same inflection, without a hint of emotion.
"Corellian Jedi and Corellians, welcome to *Saf'raire,"* Ducha Temperess AlGray said regally. "We are honored by your arrival and thank you for adjusting your plans in light of unexpected developments."
"Your honor is neither our concern nor of any importance," Natua began coldly. "Corellia is taking a great risk by allying with a group not even strong or brave enough to launch a coup on their own. Her Jedi are taking an even greater risk, as we are exposing ourselves to retribution and shame should this ill-planned coup go on ahead."
"You are our guests, so I suggest…"
"Let's get one thing clear," Shrona spoke up after Natua gently nudged her. "We are the ones with an entire war fleet above your den-moon. Whether you live or die is up to us. We can just as easily tell on you and get the Queen Mother to be our friend instead."
"Precisely," Natua continued evenly. "The fact that we have chosen to side with you is purely because it is convenient for Corellia at the moment. The minute you cease being useful, the second we suspect any one of you is thinking of going back on our deal, our alliance is off."
Ducha AlGray reeled back, but then glowered. "You cannot…" Her words died off in a strangled gurgle. Eyes darted towards the blue Twi'lek whose arm was extended towards the noblewoman.
"It appears you weren't getting the message, old woman," Alema said, her voice full of amusement. "You heard the little one. Whether you live or die is solely up to us. If I wanted to I could snap your neck and

let one of the other *smarter* houses take over. Is that what you want old woman, for me to snap your neck like a twig?"
Temperess frantically shook her head, all the while clawing at her throat for air.
"Then you'll be a good girl and do as we say?" Alema continued, a definite edge in her voice.
Temperess nodded just as frantically.
"Well then," Alema opened her hand and the Ducha was deposited unceremoniously to the ground. "Glad that's cleared up. Anyone else object to our way of doing things? You were the ones that called us in after all."
The Hapan nobles all exchanged panicked and uncertain glances with on and other, shifting uncomfortably. Eventually, each of them shook their head in negative.
'Good. I'm going to go find the guest suites. Carry on."
The deafening silence left in the wake of the retreating click of her heels on the hangar floor stretched out as Corellians and Hapans tried to make sense of what had just happened.
"Well then," Ducha Galney was the first to recover. "If you will follow us, we'll lead you to the conference room and we can make our final plans there."
"Lead the way," Natua said, stone-faced.
Following the Hapan delegation, Valin and Jysella fell into step on either side of Natua. "What was that? Aren't they supposed to be our allies?"
"I was thinking in terms of being Hapan. In order to be allies, they had to see us as equal or superior. Shrona and I were going to demonstrate that we would not be pushed around like their servants or the lesser noble houses," Natua said in a low voice. "Unfortunately, Alema took that one step further and made *them* feel inferior and helpless as well, not my intended plan. What the former-Jedi Rar has planned, I do not know. But it will be much harder to work with the nobles now that they have it in their minds we view them *and* treat them as inferiors."
"What *is* Alema planning?" Valin scowled, shooting a glance at his sister.
"Whatever it is," Natua said. "There is no mistaking that she has come dangerously close to the dark side, perhaps she has even fallen and learned to hide it."
"Natua," Jysella spoke up in protest.
"Were you capable of it, would you have throttled the Ducha and used the Force to make them all fear you?" Natua asked simply.
Jysella shook her head silently.

"Wherever Alema has been, it is clear her view of the galaxy has changed greatly," Natua concluded. "The Hapans are not the only ones we will have to keep an eye out for."

}-(IV)-{ }-(IV)-{

The meeting room was deep underground beneath the palace. Insulated and hardened against all forms of surveillance, what was said in the room was only going to be known by those in it.

Which was fortunate considering the nature of the current conversation.

"So you are saying that regardless of the birth of the crown princess, your people won't be able to get into position for at least another two weeks?" Valin said in disbelief. "Our fleet is in Consortium space *now*."

"That's why we wanted to delay the meeting," Ducha Zir-dan Gheer said with a worried nod. "Travel permits to Hapes were limited when the Queen Mother returned from Denon. We were only able to get thirty-percent of our agents in before then."

"However the birth of the *chume'da* complicates things," Ducha Asin'vi Aros spoke up. "Should the Queen Mother have been removed from power without a designated heir, the Heritage Council would have been able to assume control without any problems."

"In other words, when the Queen Mother gives birth, we will have to be rid of her daughter to end the line of succession," Duch'da Rivan Chell said coldly. "Even if we removed the Queen Mother, Hapan law dictates that her daughter will be next in line. The Royal Guard, who would have been obligated to safeguard us after the Queen Mother's removal, would be loyal to the *chume'da* instead."

"You can't seriously be talking about killing a babe who was just born?" Jysella said incredulously.

"If the Queen Mother publicly renounces her family's claim to Hapes, then we won't have to," Zir-dan answered.

"And how will you get her to do that?" Alema scoffed. "If you off her, she won't be able to give any statement. You kidnap her and the Royal Guard will hound you. Are you going to send a delegation to her demanding such a statement?"

"If she won't step down, then we will have no choice to purge her family line from Hapes," Ducha Siabali Galney said with unnerving calm. "Our scientists are developing a nanovirus tailored specifically to the Royal Family. Anyone with familial ties to the Queen Mother will be little more than walking corpses within hours of being infected. This should remove any 'legitimate' claims to the throne and ensure the Heritage Council's power."

"The Corellians can help us by keeping the Royal Navy at bay until we've re-established control over the chain of command. The Jedi, to keep the Elite Guard away until we have deposed the Queen Mother and *chume'da*," Ducha Vianel Thane simpered. "Our own people will do the wet-work. It should be Hapans who decide the future of Hapes after all."
"Killing a child is out of the question," Jysella objected.
"Then we will simply take the child and the Corellian Jedi can raise her as one of their own," the lone male noble in the room, Duch'da Ri'ander Chell answered in clipped tones. "Either way, the child cannot remain in Consortium space."
"We can decide on the fate of the child when the time comes," Siabali cut in impatiently. "What we must do now is decide if we should go ahead with the coup with only the assets we have in place now, or wait until all is in readiness. With the strength of the Corellian fleet, coupled with the ships loyal to our families, we have enough to launch an attack today if we have to. The longer we wait, the greater the chance our plot will be detected."
"Agreed, if you think security is tight with the birth of the *chume'da* around the corner, wait until after she is born. My House's attempt to eliminate her when she was in the womb failed and we were only fortunate that the lesser Houses were the ones that took the blame. I was a fool to leave things to Exna, but at least we were able to learn about their response," Zir-dan said tersely. "After the failed poisoning, security was so tight, and the Royal Guard practically everywhere. Even petty criminals decided to take the next few weeks off."
"So you are basically saying we only have one shot left in our blaster," Valin spoke, his face impassive. "We fire that charge and it will either take out our enemy or give our position away. If we miss…"
"Then Corellia will undoubtedly become the enemy of the Queen Mother and the forces she commands," House Galney's Ducha finished. "And the winners of the coming civil war will decide the fate of the losers."
"First things first," Temperess AlGray spoke for the first time. "Are we to launch our attack now or in two week's time?"
"If we only have one shot, two week's time would be better," Jysella said. "Even if we have all our forces in place, it's no guarantee that we'll win, but the chances will definitely be stronger."
"I agree," Natua spoke with a singular nod.
"House Gheer and House Chell likewise believe a later attack will be more successful." The delegates from the two Houses spoke.

"Then it is only a matter of dividing up the Jedi," Ducha Galney said. "How many have you brought with you?"
"All eight Knights from our praxeum," Valin said. "Our masters stayed behind on Corellia to look after the younger ones and coordinate efforts there. There is an equal split between those suited for directing space battle, and those better off fighting on the ground. The moment a single Jedi enters the Hapan system, however, the Queen Mother will detect him or her. We will be the last pieces to move, the signal that the attack should commence."
"Understood." The Heritage Council members all nodded. "We will let our houses know of the upcoming attack and plan accordingly. Thank you again for your assistance. The history of the Consortium will soon be rewritten."
"Yes," Alema said with a smirk. "Yes, it most definitely will."
}-(V)-{ }-(V)-{
Jysella was awakened to the incessant sound of a blaring alarm. Unlike Natua and Alema, she and Valin had opted to return to their quarters aboard the Corellian dreadnaught rather than remain on Sapphire in the guest quarters. A decision that she wasn't sure she regretted or not. She quickly threw on her Jedi robes, emerging from her quarters at the same time as her brother.
"It's not even morning yet and there's already trouble, just great," Valin said grumpily.
"Hope it's the easily manageable kind," Jysella said, similarly displeased. Neither she nor her brother were good at waking up on cue, at least not until they had their cup of caf. And being awakened only a couple of hours after going to sleep was not welcomed in the slightest.
They moved onto the bridge where Admiral Karathas was barking out orders. With her was Ducha Zir-Dan Chume Ta'Gheer, who had come aboard to coordinate Corellian fleet-movements with the ships of her own House.
"Deploy fighter wings Alpha and Gamma! Tell the *Corsuca Gem* to swing about!"
"What's going on, Admiral? Ducha?" Valin shouted over the almost deafening din of the busy bridge.
"Hapan Royal Navy elements dropped out of hyperspace for a surprise spot-check of House AlGray. We tried to hide behind the other Relephon moons, but hiding twenty capital ships at a moment's notice was too much. It didn't help that those Royal Navy pilots were thorough. Their scouts detected the outer edge of our fleet and we had no choice but to engage them. Comm-scan reports a small fleet of two

Hapan Battle Dragons escorted by four *Nova*-class battle cruisers. They were attempting an outbound course when the vanguard of our fleet caught up with them. We're fortunate Relephon's gravity well is keeping them from jumping, but we're pretty sure they manage to get word out to neighboring fleets."
"'Easily manageable kind,'" Jysella mumbled to herself. "What's the status on the enemy fleet unit?"
"We've taken out one Battle Dragon and the two battle cruisers that had been escorting it. The other three vessels are being protected by their fighter screen and continue their attempts to flee."
"There's no way those captains could have expected running smack dab into a battle fleet," Valin said. "Broadcast a demand to surrender. We have to know if there's more to this spot-check than we're seeing."
"They're Hapan Royal Navy, surrender is not an option for them," Zir-dan said grimly. "They'll die serving their Queen Mother. Besides, we're better off if there's no survivors, less chance of our plans being discovered."
"Do it anyway," Valin ordered sharply. "Any casualties on our side?"
"Heavy structural damage to the *Bombardier* and *Hand of Justice*," the admiral reported, gesturing to the Corellian frigates. "Captains of both are dead, as are a good portion of the crews. We'll probably end up scrapping one or both for spare parts. We've also lost seventeen fighters, despite the near ten-to-one odds in our favor. The Royal Navy pilots were much more skilled than the farmboys we were given."
"Sir! Another Battle Dragon and two more Novas just dropped out of hyperspace. It appears as if they're trying to cover the retreat of the three in our scopes," a sensor operator called out.
"Must have been close by enough to receive the distress call before we could jam it," Karathas cursed. "Tell the *Blindside* and *Acolyte* to target the battle cruisers first. We won't be able to touch that third dragon until our heavy ships have caught up."
"The longer our fleet stays here, the greater a chance more Hapans will see it," Valin cautioned.
"Agreed, we need to move the bulk of the fleet away from here. Ducha, recommendations?"
"Get me Ducha Galney," Zir-dan ordred, snapping a finger at a comm-officer. He quickly obeyed. "Siabali. A situation has arisen in orbit. Is your territory ready to receive the Corellian fleet?"
"We are. How grave a situation is it?"
"The Corellians have things under control, but the events will bring intense scrutiny on House AlGray. It is best if the Heritage Council leaves sometime today."

"Understood." The image of the Ducha faded away.
Addressing the Jedi and Corellians, Zir-dan gestured to the sprawling fleet. "Move the fleet to the Terephon system, House Galney's territory. It is shrouded in the Transitory Mists, which prevents any long-range or holocomm emissions from escaping. It is considered backwater by most Hapans, and the Ducha's younger sister is a noted supporter of the Queen Mother, so the Queen Mother won't even think to look there."
"Jedi?" Admiral Karathas looked to the two Horns for approval.
"Do it," Valin nodded once.
"Comm-operator! Tell any ships not currently engaged with the Hapans to withdraw to the following coordinates. Helm, I want us in the middle of that skirmish, and I wanted us there yesterday!"
The Corellian fleet quickly began breaking formation, peeling off and heading towards different exit vectors as fast as they could. The *Halcyon*, in the meantime, continued to press forward, finally overtaking the ships that had been bogged down in battle.
"Targeting solutions on all remaining enemy vessels, acquired," the weapons station called out.
"Target engines, weapons, and life support. Fire when ready," Karathas announced.
The Corellian dreadnaught, twice the size of a standard Hapan Battle Dragon, loomed large over the fighting. Lasers and rockets continued to fly back and forth between the surviving Hapans and the Corellian forces. In comparison to the behemoth hovering above them, however, the ships that flitted and darted about looked absolutely puny and insignificant.
One second, it looked as if the surviving Hapans were going to hold their own against the numerically superior Corellians, escaping into hyperspace to warn the rest of the Consortium.
The next, any hope of escape, or even survival, disappeared. Firepower twice that of an Imperial-class Star Destroyer suddenly filled the void of space. The Hapans never stood a chance. A barrage of turbo lasers obliterated bravely piloted Miy'til and X-wing fighters. The torrential laser fire blazed through the Hapan squadrons, annihilating dozens at a time. Like popcorn in a pressure cooker, fighters disappeared in small puffs of fire and debris at a rapid rate, no matter where they tried to fly.
One of the surviving Nova-class battle cruisers lived up to its namesake, vanishing in a blinding ball of light after it was hammered by wave after wave of laser and missiles. The overwhelming firepower

continued, blazing through space in a curtain of molten red energy that shredded anything in its path.
A second battle cruiser trying to maneuver out of the way, had its engines wrecked by several heavy rockets. Once it was dead in space, its fate was sealed. One laser barrage after another battered its already spent shields, and rippling explosions traversed the top of the once proud ship. One final blast ripped the ship into pieces, leaving behind a smoldering wreck and a trail of bodies and metal debris.
The remaining battle cruiser tried to do its part to buy the Battle Dragons time to retreat, but when another wave of missiles slammed into its bridge, it too was reduced to an unrecognizable ruin.
Realizing that escape was no longer an option, the two Battle Dragons and surviving fighters rallied and set themselves on collision courses with the Corellian dreadnaught. They opened up everything they had, green and red lasers streaking through space and splashing against the dreadnaught's shields.
"Weapons, finish them. We'll fish out any survivors later," Karathas called out as the ship rocked from the battery of enemy fire. "Break those dragons in half."
The dreadnaught and other Corellian vessels in support unleashed everything they had on the suicidal vessels. The first Battle Dragon was severed in two by a concentrated barrage, its two disc-like segments falling prey to a continued salvo until there was nothing left of the once proud ship. The remaining fighters quickly disappeared in blazes of light, and the lone Battle Dragon was ablaze, dead in space as its engines were blown out by other ships behind it.
"They're overloading their main reactor!"
"Pull the rest of the fleet back, all power to deflector shields."
Jysella and Valin rooted themselves in the Force, trying to calm themselves for the tidal wave of death they knew would soon follow. A split second later, the remaining Battle Dragon went up in a ball of bright light. The lives of the surviving crew, nearly eight-hundred in all, were snuffed out in a single instance. The explosion continued on, consuming the wreck of the Battle Dragon and any survivors that might have been aboard that ship as well.
"How many people on a Battle Dragon?" Valin asked the Ducha in a low voice.
"Fully-crewed? A thousand, four-hundred, and sixty-three," Zir-dan replied. "If you're worried about losses, it's the battle cruisers you should feel more regret for. In addition to their marine detachments, they have just shy of two-thousand people aboard. That's of course not counting the wing of fighters that was wiped out in this skirmish."

"So just like that, almost twenty-thousand lives are gone," Jysella said faintly, looking ill.
"More lives will be lost if they had escaped to tell the Queen Mother of their discovery. Think of their lives as sacrifices to avoid an even greater shedding of blood," Zir-dan said pragmatically. "Besides, didn't the Corellians lose several hundred people in this attack as well? Feel grief for them, for dying so far away from their homes for a cause they personally wouldn't have seen any benefit from. But that is the way this galaxy works, has always worked. Commit an act of smaller evil now, or an act of greater evil later. Bloodshed has been the only way this galaxy has seen change. It makes little sense that that would change now."
"Helm, the moment we've recovered out people and our damaged ships, set a course for the Terephon system. We do not want to be here when Hapan reinforcements arrive," Admiral Karathas ordered, none of the stress of the situation showing on her aged face. "Jedi Knight Horn, will your compatriots on Sapphire be joining us?"
Valin reached out with the Force to check. After a minute, he shook his head. "Alema is staying. Natua and her apprentice are traveling with Ducha Galney in her personal shuttle."
"Very well," Karathas said. "Ducha Gheer, will you be staying with us or returning to House Gheer's Divora system?"
"I'll be staying on," Zir-dan replied. "My House fleet is already awaiting me in the Terephon system so I'll join up with them once we arrive."
"That takes care of that then," Valin said. "We'll leave the bridge to you, Admiral."
"Understood."
"Do not worry, Corellians, Jedi. By the time the week is out, there will no longer be a need for intrigue. The Queen Mother will have either stepped down or been slain, and you will be rewarded for your loyalty to the true rulers of Hapes."
}-(Chapter End)-{

Jacen
}-(I)-{ }-(I)-{
"*In light of the unprovoked attack on the members of our Royal Navy, the Queen Mother has announced a restriction on travel in all sectors. Only those on royal business or conducting officially sanctioned tasks can travel between Consortium systems. Anyone caught violating the curfew will be detained until such time the Queen Mother sees fit. In the meantime, a general muster has been issued to all Consortium*

planets to counter the Corellian menace. All fleet and guard units are being mobilized for the first time since the Yuuzhan Vong War. The..."
"Master, why are you torturing yourself with that?" Nelani sighed, the flick of her wrist shutting off the HoloNet reports streaming from Hapes. "Don't you trust Jedi Knight Zekk and the Queen Mother to stay alive?"
"Trusting and knowing are two different things," Jacen exhaled, staring up at the ceiling of the *Falcon*. "I just left my daughter and the woman I love in an isolated part of the galaxy that's on the verge of going to war with one of the strongest post-war governments still around. Worse, I can't do a thing about it because anything I do would involve both the Jedi Order and the Galactic Alliance."
"Then step down from the High Council," Seha advised softly. "If you don't want to make it look like you're acting for a galactic government and the Order as a whole, step down and join the Queen Mother."
"We are talking about the same person, right?" Jacen said wearily. "Tenel Ka would kick my butt if I ever did something as selfish as that. As part of the Jedi High Council, as part of the Senate, I have the ability to affect hundreds of star systems. As a regular Jedi, as Jacen Solo, I'd only be able to help one at a time. As badly as I want to just hand off my titles to the next Jedi, I can't."
"Is there *anything* you can do on the Senate side of things? I mean, won't the other members of the Galactic Alliance get nervous if a heavyweight like Corellia is throwing ships into a civil war?" Nelani asked.
"If I did that, Cal Omas would lose one of the last stable supports he has in the Galactic Alliance," Jacen explained faintly. "Corellia is propping up nearly a quarter of the reconstruction and resettlement projects he initiated. They're actually getting things done *because* of their unorthodox methods. Hapes, as strong an ally as they have been, are still isolationists who haven't exactly gained the trust of the rest of the galaxy. The Jedi Order is only close to Hapes because of Tenel Ka and her mother. If it wasn't for the two of them, the Hapans would be as alien to us as Bakura or one of the Outer Rim territories. I mean, when was the last time you heard a famous Hapan making a mark on the galaxy like Antilles and Bel Iblis? At least the Bothans are on Tenel Ka's side thanks to the work the Hapans and Bothans did together in the Yuuzhan Vong War."
"When we get to Ossus, we'll be able to see what the rest of the Jedi think," Seha added. "You don't have to do this by yourself, master. Nelani and I are here. So is the rest of the Order."

"That's another problem," Jacen turned his head slightly. "The Jedi has become so intertwined with the rest of the Galactic Alliance that they can't act without making it appear as if they're carrying out the will of the Galactic Alliance. We'll be confined to Galactic Alliance law whether it goes against the will of the Force or not."
"What? Why?"
"Think about it," Jacen said patiently, looking haggard as he spoke. "The Jedi are part of the governing body, help get the laws passed. What will happen if even they start ignoring the rules and regulations that make up the Galactic Alliance? Everything is barely being held together as it is. If the Jedi don't follow the laws, who will? Corellia and Hapes are on their own, and we can only hope things don't escalate enough to actually involve the rest of the Galactic Alliance and Jedi."
"Then what are *we* going to do?"
"I don't know," Jacen released a deep breath and swung himself out of the bunk. "Make sure the rest of the galaxy doesn't fall apart in the interim I guess. It's not like there's a shortage of problems out there. When we get back to Ossus, I'll update the rest of the Jedi Council. Maybe even figure out just what the kriff Valin and Jysella are doing over on Corellia. And speaking of pairs, you two didn't just come by to try and cheer me up, did you?"
"Your mom sent us," Nelani said with a grin. "Said that you spent enough time thinking and moping."
"Thanks mom!" Jacen called out.
"*Any time, Jacen,"* Leia's voice echoed back through the ship.
"Your mom is so wizard," Seha gushed.
"Considering all the wars and tough spots *she's* gotten out of, I won't disagree in the slightest," Jacen laughed.
"She said if we couldn't convince you to un-hermit-ize yourself, she was going to share embarrassing baby stories about you," Nelani smirked. "So if you want, continue moping, please."
Jacen rolled his eyes, standing and shaking his head at his apprentices. "I'm up, I'm up. The last thing I need is for you two to start colluding with my mom."
The trio left the living quarters and headed towards the central room of the *Falcon*. There, Leia Organa Solo was sitting by the dejarik board, playing a match with the golden protocol droid Threepio.
"I do suggest you think about your moves first, Princess Leia," the droid advised, sending one of his pieces forwards. "Needlessly sacrificing your pieces is no way to win."
"I'm practicing a little exercise my sister-in-law taught me," Leia replied with a wry smile. "She said to just let the Force guide my

actions. If I have to think about a move, I'm using my brain and not the Force."
"I may not understand the Force, but I believe this will be the fastest I have ever won a match against you." C-3PO commented, capturing one of Leia's few remaining pieces.
Leia just continued to smile.
Jacen and his apprentices approached the board and examined the pieces. After a moment, Jacen looked up almost apologetically to the protocol droid. "Errr…Threepio, I think my mom's got you forked."
"I do not see…oh dear." If Threepio was capable of facial expressions, one of complete dumbfoundedness would have been prevalent. He surveyed the pieces and realized that his last move had opened up the creatures he had left to an attack no matter what he did. "I just don't see how that was possible."
"Well, that definitely proves the Force exists," Leia laughed triumphantly as she captured his Kintan Strider.
A couple moves later, Threepio was staring at the board in muted shock. "That…that doesn't seem possible."
"You've been hanging around dad too much," Jacen chuckled, seeing the victorious grin on his mother's face.
"Oh I was always competitive," Leia said airily. "I just preferred to exercise it in the Senate chambers and not at a card table or dejarik board. Your father's not the only one who hates losing."
"Believe me, I know," Jacen replied, sliding into one of the empty chairs at the dejarik board. "You were talking with Aunt Mara about using the Force?"
Leia made a face. "Yes. With you and Jaina going about the galaxy trying to fix it up, I figured I should at least try to live up to my heritage."
"But you're great as a politician. As a teacher of politicians. Look at what you helped Taan do. You don't need to use the Force to stand out and make a difference."
"This galaxy is falling apart, everyone in the Senate has an idea, has some plan. But they are so tied up with infighting and worrying about their own power bases that nothing will get done. The last thing it needs is another politician," Leia said softly. "I stopped being a Senator, and just the 'Solo' name can only get so much done."
"Princess Leia," Seha said hesitantly.
"Please, just Leia, Seha," Leia said kindly. "Come, have a seat."
The young teen did as bidden, taking a seat Threepio vacated.
"What's on your mind, Seha?"

Eyes darted to Jacen, who nodded both in support and consent. "Before we left Denon, Jacen said he was approached by Jedi Master Hamner and a group of people."
"Oh?" Leia raised an eyebrow at her eldest son.
"They wanted me to be co-Chief of State with Admiral Niathal," Jacen said simply.
"Oh?" Both of Leia's eyebrows shot up. "And how did you respond?"
"I refused." Jacen said with a small shrug. Despite being twenty-seven years old, he still searched his mother's face for some sign of approval.
"Good," Leia replied firmly. "You're far too young to take on the burdens of that office."
"What if you take that office?" Seha blurted, then clapped a hand over her mouth, looking completely horrified.
Leia, Nelani, and Jacen all turned to her in surprise.
"Seha?" Leia said, wrapping a supportive arm around the young teen's shoulder.
"What if you take the office?" Seha repeated in a small voice. "You've held that office before, right? When you made the Rebellion back into the Republic. You turned chaos into order even with the Empire still trying to regain what they lost. You said that more politicians are the last thing this galaxy needs, and you're right. It only needs one more. A strong leader who knows how to get things done. All the Jedi in the galaxy can't put it back together if we don't have the political weight to help us."
"Seha…" the speechless effect Seha's comments had on the room stretched out long and far.
"Sorry," Seha squeaked, looking down and visibly shrinking.
"No," Leia squeezed her arm gently. "It's okay. In principal, it's a great idea."
"I just…I don't want the galaxy to fall apart, but I don't want Jacen to be Chief of State either," Seha said, her cheeks heating. "And I don't know who else would step up, especially the way the galaxy is today. I mean, you can still be a Jedi and not use the Force…like me I guess. It might be even better if you're not part of the Order because then people will think the Order is taking over or something…" Seha got out in an even greater rush, hair falling in front of her face.
"I know one thing, kid," Han's voice startled the group and they looked up to see him standing in the doorway. "If my wife does agree to that plan, you're definitely becoming one of her aides. Everyone at the Jedi Temple on Denon keeps telling us that your mind's built for that sort of thing."

"I can't be an aide to the Chief of State!" Seha protested weakly. "I…I can't…can I?"
"The Chief of State can hire anyone they want to their staff," Han said, meeting his wife's gaze. "Kid has a point. We've waited to see if the galaxy was going to fix itself, but with things the way they are, it doesn't look like it. To be honest, sounds a heck of a lot better than you going all mystical on me. Politics is something we both know. We may hate it, but it's something we can deal with. Being a Jedi is something only our kids know how to do. Like Seha said, the Jedi need political support to stay useful. What better support than a Chief of State who has a vested interest in the well-being of all those mystical hand-wavers?"
Leia blinked. "Just a few days ago you were all for me becoming a Jedi."
Han held up his hands. "Wasn't going to interfere with your heritage, Princess. That Jedi thing is a part of who you are. I have to admit though, I'd feel a lot more comfortable with you as Chief of State than as a Jedi. No offense, you three."
"None taken, dad."
"It's just… in this galaxy, can we afford to spend time stumbling around, learning the ropes about what it means for you to be a Jedi? Leave the sword and hand waving to our kids," Han made a sweeping gesture at the three Jedi in the room. "They can't ethically do it to the thick-headed nerf herders in the Senate, so we'll have to do that part for them."
"When did you become such a smooth talker?" Leia smiled faintly.
"Hey, all those political functions had to have come in handy at some point," Han looked insulted. "Besides, I was always a smooth talker. Got you to marry me, didn't I?"
Leia, Nelani, Seha, and Jacen all rolled their eyes in unison, then all five occupants of the *Falcon* laughed as the tension faded.
"I'll definitely think about it," Leia said solemnly. "If I am going to run for Chief of State though, I have a laundry-list of things that need to get done. It'll be a challenge, as most of the politicians I knew in the New Republic days are either dead or smart were enough to stay retired after reaching their term limits."
"That's one problem down," Nelani chimed in. "Now all we have to do is fix the Corellia-Hapes situation, that situation brewing with the Imperials and Chiss, and hope no other serious galaxy-challenging problems put up."
"I really wish you hadn't said that," Han groaned. "I'd bet the *Falcon* that as soon as we reach Ossus, that's exactly what we'll face."

"Dad…if mom becomes Chief of State, *all* our problems will be galaxy-challenging," Jacen said sagely.
"Jacen, saving the galaxy is not supposed to be a normal occupation," Han countered.
"Like being a Jedi, a princess, or smuggler is a normal occupation?" Nelani said mischievously.
"Or being raised by Wookies, royalty, or intelligence operatives is normal for kids," Seha added.
Han looked at Leia, pained. "One teenage daughter was bad enough, but now we have two for free?"
"Blame Jacen."
"Hey, they followed me home," Jacen protested.
"It could be worse," Leia agreed. "He could have brought home a baby Rancor or krayt dragon or some other dangerous creature."
"And teenage girls aren't dangerous creatures?" Han said flatly. "Don't you remember the time Jaina fixed up that engine I gave her to tinker with, and used it to help an Imperial pilot get off of Yavin? Or the time she nearly got her head cut off turning Zekk back to the light side."
"My memory works just fine," Leia said winking at Nelani. "And Jaina turned out just fine too."
Han shook his head with a rueful grin. "We'll talk things over with Luke and those other guys at Ossus."
A moment of silence passed as the group just basked in the family-like atmosphere of the room.
Eventually, Nelani broke the silence. "Thirty years ago, Captain Solo, was this where you expected to be?"
"Nelani," Han snorted. "Thirty years ago, the only things I cared about was me, this ship, and Chewie. Then some strange desert hermit and a naïve farmboy cornered me in a cantina and my life hasn't been the same ever since."
"Do you regret it?"
Han came to stand behind his wife and Jacen, placing a hand on a shoulder each. "You kidding? Not even once."
}-(II)-{ }-(II)-{
Even before the *Millennium Falcon* and *Jade Shadow* landed at the Ossus Praxeum, the occupants of both vessels immediately felt something in the Force that they could never have expected.
"Anakin," Leia whispered, eyes growing round.
"No way," Jacen breathed, staring out the window at Ossus.
"Anakin?" Han looked bewildered at the stunned expressions of Jacen and Leia. "What's wrong?"

"I think he's down there," Nelani said hesitantly. "At least, someone with a powerful Force presence is."
"He's down there," Jacen confirmed. "And so is Tahiri, Danni Quee, and Tekli."
"What in blazes are they doing here?" Han blinked wildly.
"I don't know, but you might have just won your own bet," Leia replied seriously.
"I hate it when I'm right," Han breathed.
"Good thing that doesn't happen often," Jacen said in a feeble attempt to add levity to the situation.
"Hang on, receiving communications from the planet," Han touched his headset. "This is the *Falcon,* go ahead."
"*Ossus Control welcomes you guys back, you're earlier than expected."*
"We ran into some difficulties, Kam," Leia said. "My son, Anakin, is he down there?"
"One of the reasons why we called. He and Tahiri said to tell you 'hi' and that they'll meet you at the landing pad."
"Okay," Leia said faintly, sagging into the co-pilot's chair. "Okay."
Han wrapped her into a one-armed hug, amazed wonderment on his face. In the meantime, the others in the cockpit likewise tried to adjust to the sudden development.
"You okay, master?" Seha asked, looking to Jacen with concerned, warm brown eyes.
"Not sure," Jacen replied, looking a bit apprehensive as they passed through the upper atmosphere. "Haven't seen him, or even heard from him, in seven years. You've seen how much the galaxy changed in that time."
"He's still your brother, silly," Nelani lightly nudged him.
Releasing a deep breath, Jacen just nodded.
The *Falcon* descended through the cloudbank, and the occupants could immediately see the yorik-coral and metal ship parked just outside the main building.
"The *Veila*," Leia commented whimsically.
"What type of ship is that?" Nelani looked to Jacen.
"Anakin," Jacen answered succinctly.
"*Anakin*-class? I don't think I've heard of it."
"It may as well be a new class," Han said dryly. He jerked a thumb at Jacen. "His little brother came up with the designs for it all on his own. Combines Yuuzhan Vong biots and our own tech."
"So he made his own ship?" Seha said.
"Not exactly. He gave it to his then-girlfriend as a gift."

Seha and Nelani exchanged wide-eyed stares. In unison, they made an 'awwww' sound and added, "Lucky!"
"You'll be meeting both of them," Leia pointed out the viewport to the crowd awaiting them.
"I've looked at the holocrons they left behind," Nelani said eagerly. "They didn't seem like the most conventional of Jedi. I mean, Tahiri does that Vong-Jedi combat style and your brother doesn't see the dark side as most of us Jedi do."
"Yeah." Jacen, who had been focusing on the figures of his little brother and best friend, suddenly straightened in his chair. "Wow."
"What? What is it?" Nelani peered out the window.
"They have kids," Leia answered for her son, looking both hurt and proud at the same time.
"Kid*s*?" Han blurted, nearly steering their ship into the ground.
"Two," Leia pointed to the baby being held in Tahiri's arms and the young girl holding one of her father's hands.
Han took one look at the obvious family unit outside, and shouted over his shoulder. "Threepio!"
"Yes, coming Captain Solo. Coming," the awkward protocol droid managed to squeeze into the crowded cockpit.
"Take over the landing procedures," Han jerked a thumb at the controls as he vacated his seat.
"Captain Solo! I am not programmed to fly a YT-One-Three…"
"Just make sure the autopilot doesn't give out," Han was already following the others out of the cockpit.
"And if it does?"
"We're in the presence of a bunch of Jedi, hope they float the ship back into place before it crashes," Han called back.
"That's hardly reassuring," Threepio protested to the empty cockpit.
The other occupants of the ship were crowding around the landing ramp, a nervous energy in the air as they felt the ship finally touch down. Those more in tune with the Force could feel both Anakin and Tahiri's presences stretching out in welcome, even before the young couple came into view.
"They seem beyond happy," Jacen commented, sending back his own greetings. He couldn't quite muster the same level of enjoyment given the situation in the Consortium, but he was nonetheless relieved that Anakin was content with the life he had chosen.
The light from Ossus' suns bloomed out before them, the ramp touching the ground, and the crew of the *Falcon* emerged. In several quick steps, Leia had wrapped her arms around her youngest son in a fierce hug, whispering his name in a happy sob; joy and relief radiating

from her every being. Jacen looked on with a bittersweet smile. He had to admit, it definitely felt good seeing his brother again, seeing his brother in Jedi robes and looking healthy and happy.
"Missed you too, mom," Anakin said sincerely, returning the hug with the same strength.
"Come here you," Leia gestured to Tahiri.
Tahiri shifted her son and joined the group hug, happy tears streaming down cheeks.
"Your son?" Leia said, tenderly caressing the faint wisps of hair atop the sleeping infant's head.
"Yeah," Tahiri said with a warm smile. "Jayce."
"Named after Jaina and Jacen," Anakin explained, his eyes briefly drifting to his brother, who was hanging back with Han. Anakin held up the hand with the little girl attached to it. "And this one is our daughter, Cassa."
"Named after my mom," Tahiri explained. "Cassa, this is your grandmother."
"Hi grandma!" Cassa said brightly, staring up at Leia with childhood curiosity. "Are you a Jedi too? Like mommy and daddy? They're really powerful Jedi."
Leia couldn't help but chuckle, shaking her head in wonder. Squatting down so she was eye-level with the pint-sized replica of Tahiri, she smiled. "Are you a Jedi?"
"Uh huh," Cassa looked around and saw a small rock on the ground. "Look!"
Biting her lower lip, Cassa reached out a hand. Her forehead scrunched up in concentration, and after a moment, the rock began to float. Excitedly, she turned back to Leia. "See!"
"I did," Leia, unable to resist, gave the little girl a warm hug. "You are definitely a Jedi, Cassa."
As Leia hugged Cassa, a snake-like hissing noise sounded, and she pulled back slightly.
"Oh, and this is my pet, *Sah'il. Sah'il* means 'little protector' in Basic," Cassa held up her wrist to where the infantile amphistaff was coiled around. "Come on *Sah'il*, *gadmak taz."*
Leia's eyebrows rose at Cassa's flawless Yuuzhan Vong, more surprised by that than the amphistaff around the little girl's wrist. "What are you saying to…Sah'il?"
Cassa looked up, shocked. "You mean you don't know Yuuzhan Vong? But you're daddy's mommy."
"I only a few words," Leia said with a kind smile. "Maybe you can teach me some later."

"Okay!" Cassa beamed. She then glowered at her amphistaff. "I was telling *Sah'il* that he should greet you. Mommy said it's always polite to greet new people. Oooo, look! He's greeting you now!"
The amphistaff uncoiled slightly, the head rising up towards Leia in a very serpentine manner. Then, almost just as lazily, it recoiled itself; but not before turning to Cassa as if asking 'there, I did it, happy?'
Cassa lightly bopped the top of its head. "Be nice."
Leia couldn't help but laugh softly at this, seeing so much of both Anakin and Tahiri in the precocious little girl.
Off to the side, Anakin had stepped over to where Han was, looking far more uncertain than he had during the trip over. "Dad."
"Kiddo," Han said gruffly, eyes shining. His arms were folded in front of him and he was leaning against one of the hydraulic pumps of the landing ramp with an air of nonchalance. "Been a while."
"Yeah. You doing well?" Anakin held out a hand.
"Your mom makes sure of it." After a moment, Han gripped the hand firmly, then pulled Anakin into another bone-crushing hug. "It's been far too long since I did this." Anakin returned the hug, eyes closing.
They parted, with Han still keeping a firm grip on Anakin's hand. He gestured at Cass and Jayce with a jerk of his head. "Even have kids of your own now."
Anakin nodded again, his throat too tight to speak. Han looked away as well, seemingly trying to compose himself. Leia solved everything by holding baby Jayce in front of her husband. "Here, Han, you can hold your first grandson."
"Grandson…" Han reacted instinctively, cradling the child just as tenderly as he had held Jacen and Anakin when they had been babies. His face split into a grin, years melting away as he glanced back up at Anakin. "Jayce, huh?"
"I already call him Lazy Jayce," Cassa chimed, holding onto one of Leia's hands. "Because all he does is sleep and eat, and lazy rhymes with Jayce. Oh, and because he's my little brother and as his older sister I get to name him. Did you know that when he gets bigger, he's going to be able to talk too? And he'll be a Jedi just like me and daddy, and mommy, and grandma."
"Definitely takes after Tahiri," Leia said in a stage-whisper, at the end of Cassa's rapid-fire spiel.
Tahiri beamed. "Yup."
While Tahiri occupied Leia and Han with the two children, Jacen hesitantly moved forward towards his brother. He stopped when their eyes met, both searching for something, yet neither sure what they were looking for.

"Long time no see, Little Brother," Jacen said softly.
"Seven years, Jace," Anakin inclined his head with a ghost of a smile flickering as he shifted awkwardly.
"Welcome back."
"Thanks."
"Looking a little tan," Jacen commented, taking in his younger brother for the first time in a very long seven years.
"Binary star system," Anakin shrugged off-handedly. He peered past his brother, sensing the Force bond Jacen had with the two teenagers.
"Not your kids, I take it? Unless kids grow a lot faster in this galaxy than on Zonama these days."
"No," Jacen said fondly. "My apprentices. Seha Dorvald and Nelani Dinn. My daughter's back on Hapes."
"I heard from Kam and Tionne, congratulations."
"Thanks."
"Didn't think you'd be back so soon though."
"Hapes is on the verge of war with Corellia. Didn't want to complicate the situation, what with me being the Order's senator and sitting on the Galactic Alliance's High Council."
"Sorry," Anakin said, lacking anything more eloquent at the moment.
"I am too," Jacen sighed, his gaze lingering on Jayce. "So you and Tahiri have two little ones now, huh?"
"We had a nice life back on Zonama," Anakin confirmed nostalgically.
"What made you guys leave? You probably didn't come back for a family reunion, right?" Jacen deduced.
Anakin winced; leave it to his brother to be logically blunt. "Bothans attacked Zonama Sekot a month ago. Took us that long to get from Zonama's system back to here."
Jacen took great effort to keep his face emotionless, trying, but failing to hide a small swell of panic.
"Jace?"
"The Bothans are one of Tenel Ka's major allies," Jacen said carefully, rising dread and understanding mirrored in the eyes of his little brother.
"And if a war does break out, she's going to need all the allies she can get," Anakin summed up.
"But if you don't do anything, the Yuuzhan Vong will probably come here looking for retribution," Jacen filled in.
"Yeah," Anakin agreed grimly.
"We'll figure something out," Jacen said. Not said were the words '*we have to.*'

"Fate of the galaxy and all that," Anakin said with a hint of his father's smile.
"Fate of the Jedi too," Jacen said. "Not sure how much news you've been getting out there, but the galaxy's in a pretty bad shape. Unless something is done on a grand scale, the Jedi might just pass into irrelevance."
"We get some news way out where we were, and Masters Solusar have caught us up on the rest. It sounds like you've been doing your best to keep things together in spite of everything."
"What can I say, the galaxy really did fall apart without you and Tahiri wrecking havoc everywhere," Jacen said half-jokingly.
"Wanna join me in some havoc-wrecking?" Anakin held out a hand.
"Anakin," Jacen smirked, clasping the offered hand tightly. They pulled each other into a back-slapping hug, then held each other at arm-length. "I wouldn't have it any other way."
When the *Jade Shadow* landed and unloaded *her* passengers, the discomforting news of Hapes was temporarily forgotten amidst another round of hugs and heart-felt welcomes. Mara seemed to hug Anakin and Tahiri almost as hard as Leia had, and Ben and Janek quickly befriended Cassa and Jedis'sei. Laughter, back-slapping, and oohing and awwwing at Jayce commenced once again, and for a moment, a dark cloud had lifted.
}-(III)-{ }-(III)-{
At the apex of the archway Tython-to-Ossus, Jacen and his apprentices took a seat with Luke, Mara, and the rest of the Solo-clan around the meeting table. Joining them were the teachers of the Ossus Praxeum, Kyp Durron, Kam and Tionne Solusar, and Tallisibeth Enwandung-Esterhazy, and the other members of Anakin's crew, Danni Quee and Tekli. Cassa, Jedis'sei, Ben, and Janek, were off with the younger students of the praxeum, exploring and doing what young children did best; their laughter and chatter echoing up from the courtyard below.
"If I'm understanding things right, most of the galaxy's problems are being caused by the rampant crime-waves and the general reaction of politicians unable to stem those waves," Anakin said carefully, examining a holographic readout of the galaxy.
"Yes," Kyp said. "When crime started to increase, about two years after the war had ended, we at first thought it was the result of a criminal organization."
"Like the Black Sun had started up again," Jacen spoke up. "But when we examined the crimes and where they were, there was no discernible pattern."

"Right. After three years of hounding pirates, slavers, and smugglers, the Galactic Alliance was no closer to stemming the tide than they had at the start of it. Those three years also stretched resources, personnel, and other material goods pretty thin," Kyp continued. "It's become more and more an 'every-system-for-themselves' attitude recently, especially in the Outer Rim. It's why governments like Corellia, the Remnant, Hapes, the Bothans, all manage their own fleet-groups separate from the Galactic Alliance Navy."
"And of course, if people have a fleet of their own, they just have to use it," Han added his own two bits.
"To feel secure, the people need a fleet protecting them. To get a fleet, you need credits. But to make credits, you need to be secure," Leia iterated. "Only those who made it out of the war with their infrastructure relatively intact still hold any weight in the Senate, and even then, the decisions are made to keep the wealth and prosperity tied up in their corners of the galaxy."
"Annoying paradox," Danni made a face.
"No kidding. I told you earlier right? The major players at the moment, the Corellians, Bothans, Remnant, Bakurans, and Hapans, are right now vying for whatever resources they can get their hands on so they can direct the recovery of this galaxy in their favor," Kam explained. "At the same time, the pirates and criminal elements are preying on anyone that gets left behind in this mad scramble to come out as top-dog of the Galactic Alliance. It's a mess out there. You can't start solving one problem without creating a dozen more."
"And the Bothan situation makes things even more complicated," Anakin nodded in acknowledgment.
"Yes," Jacen said cautiously. "These past few years, the Bothans and Hapans have become strong allies as they've absorbed much of what was once Hutt Space. They've developed and have come to rely on their economic and military ties, efforts driven largely in part by Tenel Ka and her slough of reforms she's pushing through."
"Reforms?" Anakin asked curiously.
"She was trying to end the traditional Hapan stance of isolation," Jacen elaborated. "She reasoned that the Consortium was much like the Jedi Order. Strong on its own, yet also vulnerable because of that isolation. By reaching out to the Bothans, she had hoped they would be the first of many governments willing to work with and invest in Hapan businesses. Unfortunately, it appears the Corellians signaled her out before her plans could truly gain any traction."
"Speaking of the Corellians, where are we on them?" Kyp looked over to Luke. "Have we gotten word back from Corellia's praxeum?"

"We have," Luke said, looking grim. "They contacted Mara and I when we were en route with a pre-recorded message." The Jedi Master took out a datacard and slid it into the terminal next to him.
Seconds later, two individuals appeared over the holo-emitter.
"Alema!" Tahiri gasped.
"Alema?" Han said incredulously.
"Alema!?" Kyp gaped.
"And she's with Jedi Knight Wan," Jacen mentioned, gesturing to the figure in the center of the image.
Luke activated the message, and Natua's voice filled the room. *"We of the Jedi Praxeum on Corellia hereby officially declare our cessation of association with the rest of the Jedi Order at large. After much discussion, we have come to an agreement that the rest of the Order is in fact hindering our attempts to heal a galaxy ravaged by war and plagued by crime. Only by acting independently, by following our own path, will we be able to achieve our goals. As of today, we are no longer Jedi of the Jedi Order, but Jedi of Corellia. This message will be sent to the various news outlets the day after you receive it, so the galaxy will know that not all Jedi are beholden to the Galactic Alliance."*
The short message ended and expressions of disbelief and anger ebbed out from the gathered Jedi.
"Well, that was certainly…unique," Scout commented. "At least they were willing to declare themselves separate from the rest of the Order *before* making a mess of things."
"There's that," Mara said darkly. "I'm more worried about Rar. You saw the dark side corruption on her. If an entire praxeum's gone dark…"
The temperature in the room seemed to chill as the Jedi digested that very frightening possibility.
"Corran wouldn't go dark though," Kyp argued. "At least, I don't think he would. Come on, he's as much a by-the-book guy as you can get."
"And we definitely would have felt a shift in the Force if the entire praxeum fell to the dark side," Tionne tried to calm the others.
"Anakin, you're being fairly quiet," Leia said observantly.
"Just thinking," Anakin didn't appear to be looking at the holomessage. His gaze was rooted to the layout of the galaxy and the various symbols indicating different crimes.
As if his statement were more frightening than an entire praxeum falling to the dark side, everyone in the room shuddered.
"What are you seeing?" Jacen asked. "Galactic Alliance Intel's had our best people on it for the better part of the last five years, but still nothing."

Not even looking up, he minimized Natua's announcement and let the map of the galaxy once again resume its place over the table.
"Any way you can arrange these in chronological order?" Anakin asked, blue eyes sweeping across the five arms of the spiral before him.
Kam hit a few buttons, and the symbols changed color and shape.
"You see, in any given year, the criminal acts and pirate bases taken down are all over the place," Kyp gestured. "My wife's going crazy hunting down those bas…illegitimate children. Sorry, trying hard not to curse for Ryza's sake. Kadra will have my head if the first things they say when frustrated sound like something a Corellian smuggler would say."
"Hey!" Han called out.
"A Corellian smuggler who doesn't already have three kids and a wife to keep him in line," Kyp clarified.
"Thank you," Han said, looking satisfied.
"As I was saying. The analysts weren't able to find a single pattern to these crime waves or to the location of the pirate bases. We're not even sure how the pirates can recover so quickly after losing a base or two. It's like we'll clear then out of one system, and a month later they'll be right back at it."
To Jacen, it appeared as if his brother was only half-listening. So instead of focusing on Kyp's explanation, he too began examining the map, trying to discover just what it was his brother was looking at. Hijackings, murders, robberies, extortion rackets, they all seemed completely unrelated to one and other, taking place almost daily, but in different parts of the galaxy.
"The pattern is…there is no pattern," Anakin finally declared.
"We did say the analysts couldn't come up with anything," Mara said in amusement.
"No, really, there is no pattern," Anakin gestured to the map. "Even on accident, over the course of five years, there should have at least been one or two visible patterns. But look," he began to flip through the years, the symbols on the map changing. "You'll find very few relations between crimes and locations. Not non-existent, but few. Very few. I read through some of the briefings while waiting for you and Jacen to get back. The pirate groups that start up in areas swept by Galactic Alliance patrols are completely unrelated to the group that was there before them. The first group might have been into kidnapping, the new group into arson, the group after them into hijacking. It's not possible that randomly occurring crime waves are so dissimilar from one and other when there are a limited amount of parameters in a limited number of occupied systems. For one, these sprees should burn out

after consuming everything there is to consume, but it is like someone continues to add fuel to keep things going. Focusing on one event, or even a cluster of them, won't help anyone trying to understand this."
Jacen narrowed his gaze, sensing what his brother was hinting at. "Your time on Zonama was well spent then?"
"Lots of time to think about things. Especially with the Force practically everywhere I went," Anakin nodded. "Want to do the rest of the explanation?"
"Sure," Jacen gestured to the map. "As Jedi, we see the galaxy as a living entity, filled with the Force. Living entities are made up of cells, each of them assigned a set task. As Jedi, we need to view this situation as an ailing creature, whose cells are dying."
"Are you saying the Force is guiding these crime waves?" Kam asked, intrigued and incredulous at the same time.
"We're saying that *someone* is using the Force to guide these crime waves," Jacen received his brother's confirming nod. "Using it specifically to avoid forming any patterns or recognizable features. Think of each system as an individual cell of a body. Tiny, insignificant on its own. Yet fulfilling a function that otherwise wouldn't be fulfilled without it. It's not until you zoom out all the way and see how the cells are working with everything else that you can tell what type of creature you're looking at."
"I said before that there are few relations between crimes, that's because most of what we're seeing is chaos stemming from one or two events a year. For example, in the first year, a hijacking of transport carrying technical goods headed for a restoration project in an otherwise stable part of the galaxy," Anakin motioned to a blinking dot. "The refugees who would have been able to resettle on the planet had the project been completed are now stuck aboard their transports. Fast-forward four years, that system and the surrounding systems are now plagued with crime. That hijacking was the lone act that was planned. Everything else spawned from the desperation that followed. That lone 'cell's' job was to start a chain reaction, a cancer if you will, that was both predictable yet unpredictable at the same time."
"What do you mean?" Han scratched his head.
"The predictable thing, dad, is something you can account for. Like, what will happen to the project when that restoration project fails to get the parts that were hijacked?"
"It stalls," Nelani answered. "The Galactic Alliance can't allocate a replacement shipment until other projects receive their own allotments.
"And the people of that planet?"

"Are stuck where they are until their planet is fixed," Seha said.
"Right, and that's as far as the plotter of this event could see. The unpredictable part is left up to the nature of the several million refugees now desperate for a home, a better place to live. They can appeal to the Galactic Alliance Senate, but for the reasons Jacen's apprentice said, replacements will take a long while to arrive. What will they do then?"
"In the end, as resources on board the transports and refugee camps grow scarce, people are reduced to their most basic instincts to survive," Jacen said softly. "Some might be driven to acts of charity, to support one and other. Others, to crime, as they do anything they can to get food and shelter. Give a single steak of bantha to a room full of starving people and some will share it, others will kill to have all of it, and others still will envy those who got a bite and plot against them to prevent them from having bites in the future. What will happen is anyone's guess, but first you have to make those people starve."
"Exactly," Anakin nodded. "All that is needed is for several key events to occur over the years, to cause everything around them to spiral out of control. I can say with some certainty that the object of the instigator of the crime waves is not power, territory, or credits."
"Then what?" Luke said his forehead creased and wrinkles prominent.
"Chaos," Jacen answered simply. "They're taking the living being that is the galaxy, changing out cells for cancerous ones, all for the point of leaving chaos in its wake."
"Do you think the recent conflict between Hapes and Corellia is a byproduct of this chaos-maker?" Danni asked the two Solos.
"It's the key to unraveling it, or at least one of them," Anakin answered carefully. "The Bothan-Yuuzhan Vong issue is probably another. They're our equivalent to a 'hijacked goods-transport,' an event planned solely for the purpose of unraveling the fabric of civilization in that region of space. The perpetrators only need a couple of events per year in certain locations to fuel the crime wave, each building off the random events of the last, and that is where the Force comes into play."
"Great, we now know the how and why, but what about the 'who'?" Kyp spoke. "All this knowledge won't help us if we can't figure out who's doing this."
"Leave the Hapes-Corellia thing to Alema, Natua and the Corellians," Tahiri said. "And I'm not saying that because I want to get to the bottom of the Bothan thing, but it looks as if Natua, at least, has an idea of what she'll find. If she knows, then Valin and Jysella are probably in on it too."

"So what then? We go to Bothawui and accuse them of carrying on a genocide mandated by their culture?" Mara said dryly.
"No," Anakin shook his head. A vast majority of the room visibly relaxed. "At least not yet. If the meeting with the Bothans goes wrong, Hapes will be out an ally they can't afford to lose. Even if Alema and the others get a handle on the situation. The Bothans are one of the first outside allies to form ties with the insular Hapans. If that relationship fails without any others, then future alliances with Hapes will be harder to come by."
"So what do you suggest?" Luke said curiously. "Find Hapes more allies?"
Even Jacen had to shake his head. "Anakin, very few governments are willing to get involved in a war so soon after the Yuuzhan Vong War. Very few governments even have the capabilities of the Bothans in terms of both fleet and ground forces available. Or economically and socially for that matter."
"What about the Mandalorians?" Tahiri asked. "They were our allies during the Yuuzhan Vong War, weren't they?"
"The new Mandalore is more mercenary than the last," Mara shook her head in negative. "Their help would cost much more than Tenel Ka can afford to spend, especially in these times."
"Bakurans?" Danni voiced. "I read that they've become somewhat of a power broker in their region of space."
"Too far removed," Kyp answered. "They tend to focus on safeguarding their own little region of space. They loathe getting involved in galactic politics."
"Quit thinking big," Anakin chided lightly, in contrast to his earlier argument. "We don't need to find that one ally that embodies everything you've mentioned—ground forces, fleet, and political and economic wherewithal."
"What are you suggesting?" Leia said patiently.
Anakin looked sheepish as he looked to his mom. "Errr…how are Cakhmaim and Meewalh?"
"They're just fi…Anakin!" Leia's eyebrows shot up.
"What? What's going on?" Seha said in a whisper.
"You want to bring the Noghri into this." Jacen stated to his brother in answer.
"They already see mom, and us by extension, as something akin to royalty," Anakin said softly. "And they'd definitely solve any issues with ground forces. An alliance with the Hapans can also help their culture advance technologically and benefit their own planet."

"You'd be taken advantage of the trust they have in your family," Luke said, a note of warning in his voice.
"No," Anakin shook his head, eyes challenging Luke. The entire room went silent as the balance of power shifted almost tangibly. "I'd give them a choice. They revere mom, and feel that they owe her a debt for revealing the truth to them. We tell them that they help protect Jacen's family from any threat, help them through these times, and that the debt will be fulfilled. This way their honor is fulfilled, and any further protection of mom and dad will come from personal loyalty and not a sense of cultural obligation. If you think I'm using them, fine. But I'm using them so they won't be in a similar position in the future. So that Hapes will be a strong ally in the future and help their people grow."
"Well," Mara cleared her throat. "That takes care of the ground forces problem, but we still have the issue with the Bothan fleet being unmatched by most. As well as the benefits created by trade with the Bothans. You said it yourself, Anakin, they aren't exactly the economic powerhouse Hapes needs."
"We officially declare the Jedi on the side of the Queen Mother," Anakin replied.
His comment immediately caused a slew of objections to erupt from the others.
"Jedi are supposed to remain impartial."
"How are we to keep the peace if we take sides?"
"This would be a gross abuse of our power."
Anakin held up a hand, the room going quiet. "We've already chosen sides. The Corellian Praxeum has sided with Corellia. They took great effort to separate themselves from the rest of the Order to do so. Why? Because they didn't want it to seem like the Order supported Corellia's actions. This leaves us free to show that we oppose Corellia's attempts at war. We're already plotting to bring the Noghri and who knows who else into this war, fighting for Tenel Ka's side. How are we to stay impartial after that? The Jedi have their own fighters, their own allies to call upon. Why not use it?"
"And that's the problem," Kyp spoke. "We can't use it without seeming like the Galactic Alliance is condoning the war. The Jedi Order and the Galactic Alliance have become too intertwined for one to act without the approval and knowledge of the other. We may be able to act the puppet-master and rearrange the chess pieces, but any overt action is not possible. Laws passed prevent the Galactic Alliance from becoming involved in internal disputes between its member states."
"Then use that perception to our benefit," Anakin answered without hesitation. "From what I've heard from Master Solusar and the others is

that the galaxy is waiting for a hero to swoop in and right the wrongs. Waiting for the Jedi Order to distance itself from politics and actually make a difference. Have the Jedi step down from the High Council. At this point, it doesn't matter who they appoint to replace them. Instead of empty promises, actually show that the Order is moving in a different direction. The public won't doubt the Jedi's sincerity if they give up the trappings of public office and actually do something unexpected."
"You're talking about an upheaval of the government as if it were nothing," Kam said faintly, shaking his head at what he was hearing.
"Name a single thing of any significance the High Council with the Jedi on board managed to accomplish since the start of the rise in crime," Danni spoke up. "The Jedi aren't meant to be part of the political system. It was necessary to win the Yuuzhan Vong War because of how scared and corrupt the senators were then, but once the war was over, the High Council should have been dissolved. This government is in dire need of an overhaul, starting with the Jedi."
"As a member of the High Council, I can call an emergency meeting tonight," Kam exhaled. "With Master Skywalker's blessing, it should expedite things. You can explain your reasoning then."
"Thank you, Master Solusar," Anakin inclined his head.
"Still haven't changed, Anakin. Your plans are as crazy as ever," Jacen remarked, still feeling slightly dazed. Was his brother really going to swoop in and solve a problem nearly a half-decade in the making in a couple of days? Was his brother, who had exiled himself and hadn't been in touch with the rest of the galaxy for seven years, going to accomplish more than he, as a senator and member of the High Council, could? Jacen's mouth felt dry, preventing him from saying any more.
"Lots of practice with Yuuzhan Vong politicians, Jace," Anakin said lightly, his expression changing slightly as if he had picked up on his brother's feelings. "Had lots of conversations with Sekot too. Only so much time you can spend rebuilding a society."
"Right," Kyp said blankly.
"So…" Nelani spoke up. "It sounds as if you're taking care of the fleet and political thing at the same time?"
"Why not?" Anakin shrugged. "Revamp a government, save my brother's family, and isolate the Bothans so they won't have any political leverage when we do approach them."
"Don't forget discover the source for the crime waves and restoring this galaxy to the nice peaceful place it was after the war," Tekli added, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, that's just a side benefit," Anakin said playfully, oblivious to the stares of disbelief directed towards him. "Of course, everything's easier said than done. We'll need to go to Denon to untangle the political mess there, and work out a whole bunch of alliances that will be sure to rankle some. Not to mention find a way to avert a war and change the way the government is run."
"Anakin," Mara narrowed her eyes. "Those things are definitely *a lot* easier said than done."
Tionne, in her calm voice, looked to Anakin puzzled. "I thought you didn't want to be in the galactic spotlight? This will put you and Tahiri directly into it the moment the media gets wind of your involvement."
"Can't avoid it," Tahiri answered with a shrug. "Our only problem is our daughter. We've tried to ready Cassa for it, but I don't think she quite understands. In her mind, the media will be treating her like most of the Yuuzhan Vong on Zonama, a child of two divinities."
"Don't worry, if she hangs out with Ben and Janek, they'll keep her from being overwhelmed," Mara said reassuringly. "Initiate Kani Asari is also fiercely protective of people important to Ben. I think Cassa will find herself an instant big sister in no time."
"That's definitely reassuring," Tahiri smiled, relieved.
"Getting back on topic," Kam said seriously. "It'll take a little while to get the appropriate calls in and arrangements made. So until then, you're more than welcome to stay at the praxeum. Force knows when you'll be able to relax next with everything you have planned."
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It was oddly peaceful, the free-growing nature surrounding the curving buildings of the praxeum. Where Ossus had once been a desolate wasteland, the area around the praxeum resembled an oasis of plants and wildlife.
The shapers and gardeners who lived at the praxeum took great pride in their work, creating winding paths through and assortment of towering trees, flowering bushes, and creeping vines. The shapers had even reintroduced once extinct native species by examining the DNA profiles that had been recorded in the ancient databases of the old Jedi Library. Small birds flitted to and fro, rodents with mouths full of seeds darted across paths and back into the underbrush. Even insects buzzed about, adding to the surreal natural setting of Ossus reborn.
Normally, such a place would have been relaxing for Jacen. In his childhood he had developed strong bonds to the Force in the creatures and plants around him, had an affinity with animals and all things living. Absently running his fingers over the smooth surface of a large leaf, he gazed up at the two suns glowing in the blue sky. That young

teen he had once been—naïve and full of hope, and always on hand with a joke or two to lighten the mood—that young teen seemed like such a stranger to him now. He wondered how his past self would view his current self, if he'd have liked the person he became. He almost laughed at that. His younger self would probably tell his current self to lighten up and not be such a straight-laced Jedi.
"Any interesting thoughts, Jace?"
Jacen glanced over his shoulder with a rueful shake of his head. "Not really. Thanks for coming."
"Hey, we haven't talked in seven years. Think that's been some sort of record for us." Anakin emerged from another pathway, idly scanning his surroundings. He carried himself with a confidence Jacen couldn't remember seeing before. Sure, during the war Anakin might have appeared to be in control of things, but that was all it had been, an illusion. The moment that bubble was popped, his little brother had been revealed to be a frightened teenager in way over his head. But there was none of that now. His little brother truly had grown up.
"You settling in okay?"
"More or less. Cassa and Jedis'sei are playing with Lowie and Waroo. First time either of them have seen a Wookie. They seem to think 'Wookie' is now analogous to a climbing structure," Anakin answered with a small chuckle. "Tahiri's already talking with the local shapers, Tekli's with Master Cilghal teaching her everything she's learned, and Danni's getting caught up on the scientific advancements she missed out on."
"What about *you?*" Jacen asked solemnly. "It couldn't have been easy to come back here."
Anakin nodded in silent agreement, the two beginning to traverse down the dirt road. The dirt and fallen leaves crunched beneath their feet, the bird calls around them filling in for the moment of quiet between the two brothers.
"Enjoy your time away, at least?"
"Definitely. It was enlightening, thought definitely difficult at times. Starting a family with Tahiri though, I wouldn't trade that for anything. How about that mystical journey you went on with Vergere?"
"Enlightening. Different. Frustrating. I learned that there's so much more I need to learn. That answers only lead to more questions."
"I encountered that quite a few times talking with Sekot," Anakin said with a sly smile. "Trick is to not let that need for answers drive you. You can't know everything."
"True," Jacen matched Anakin's expression. "You'd go crazy if you tried."

Their trip took them to a lake-side path, the suns causing the water to shimmer and take on a silver-like sheen.
"How's Jaya been?" Anakin asked, this time breaking the silence.
"Flying around in Chiss space," Jacen answered vaguely. "We don't really keep in touch."
"Oh."
"She'll definitely be on the first ship back here once she hears you've returned though," Jacen commented glibly.
"And I thought the hug I got from Aunt Mara and mom couldn't be any more suffocating," Anakin said in mock horror.
"Yeah," Jacen smirked at the memory. As tall as Mara was, Anakin was a good head taller, and it had looked rather funny to see his little brother in the death grip of both his mom and aunt. Being an all powerful Jedi didn't protect anyone from the strength of a mother's hug.
Jacen levitated a nearby pebble, and with another gesture, sent it skipping across the surface of the lake. Stepping up next to him, Anakin copied his routine.
"Mom really missed you, you know," Jacen said carefully. "When I started out on my journey of discovery, she made me swear to call the *Falcon* at least once a week. Said that she would at least have *one* of her children to talk to regularly."
"You were always closer to her," Anakin answered with a shrug, sending another stone skipping across the water. "I would have thought she'd be relieved. What with me no longer getting into life and death situations on a daily basis."
"You didn't miss mom or dad?" Jacen said with raised eyebrows.
"Course I did," Anakin said almost reluctantly. "But after having to raise my two kids…let's just say they didn't exactly do the best of jobs with us. Don't get me wrong, I love them. But I spent most of my childhood on Yavin Four. Probably saw more of my teachers, of insane villains, than mom and dad. Like I said, you were always closer to her because you could *understand* her viewpoints. Not just hear the concepts she taught us, but knew what it was she was talking about at the core of things. I was never patient enough for that. Nor was Jaina for that matter. But even you have to admit that we were as far from a 'normal' family, having a 'normal' life that we could get. And I just left that normal life on Zonama Sekot because things over here finally boiled over and wrecked that life that I spent seven years building with Tahiri."

There was no emotion in his brother's voice, only a strange peace, as if he was simply stating facts. The emotional detachment from the issue only made Anakin's argument seem all the more convincing.
Jacen sent two stones jumping across the water as he tried to formulate some sort of response. Anakin had a point. Of the three of them, he was the only one who had stayed in constant contact with their parents. Even Jaina's once-every-few-months basic greeting card of 'hi, I'm having fun, still alive, hope you're well' lacked a certain amount of warmth and detail that one might desire.
"Guess there are some benefits to becoming a senator and staying on the High Council after all," Jacen said ironically.
"About that…Earlier at that meeting, I didn't mean to step on your toes," Anakin said hesitantly, lowering the next stone to focus on his brother.
"It's okay," Jacen said quickly. As he said the words, he realized he meant them. A genuine smile stretched unfamiliarly across his face. "Really. It felt just like the old days, when we were in a room full of adults trying to get their heads wrapped around a seemingly impossible problem and you come in and solve the problem like the answer was so obvious. It really is good to have you back Anakin."
"It *is* good to be back," Anakin exhaled, matching Jacen's boyish grin. "Well, if it weren't for the whole galaxy falling to pieces and my family once again facing life or death situations and annoying odds."
"No kidding," Jacen shook his head tiredly. He let the next rock he was levitating plop down into the water with an unceremonious splash. "Maybe it's a good thing you've come back to offer your insight. The same sets of eyes have been going over everything and drawing blanks for the past five years. Vergere was right in some ways. Everyone in the Order had gotten used to you and Tahiri pulling some ridiculously implausible plan out of wherever it is you pulled them out of. They had gotten used to looking to the two of you for guidance. If it wasn't the Freed Ones, it was philosophies on the Force. If it wasn't media advice, it was how to improve relations between Jedi and non-Jedi. Even the High Council was used to you solving their problems with great abuse of political power and innovation. Then you two left. Uncle Luke decided to stay a teacher on Ossus. And suddenly everyone was looking at a galaxy at peacetime. We had been soldiers, fighter pilots, aggressive diplomats for nearly five years. The galaxy after the war was so different than what it had started out as. None of us had a clue about what to do except fall back on what semi-worked before. And here we are again. You two come back, produce a solution, and things will probably start to fall back into place sooner or later."

Jacen hadn't meant to sound weary, exhausted from all the politics and posturing. He didn't want to sound like he was making excuses either. He had accepted politics as an aspect of his life, the posturing as something that just came along with the territory. He knew that even his best intentions didn't have a chance if others couldn't be convinced they were for the better. Short of declaring himself Emperor and spacing everyone who disagreed with him, he had quickly learned that there really wasn't much he *could* do as a senator, even one who sat on the High Council.

The other Jedi of the High Council, Barratk'l, Kyle, Octa, Kirana, Kam, and Tresina, were about as far away from his own philosophies as possible. Kyle and Kam were too wary of the dark side to even consider the Unifying Force he and Vergere adhered to. Octa was a disciple of Kyp, but she viewed the Jedi through an inflexible, narrow lens. Tresina followed his uncle's teachings and was loyal to them to an almost frustrating degree. And Barratk'l, the relative newcomer, though very patient and politically adept, had few followers in the Order and very limited influence.

Every proposal had been an uphill battle. Every vote, a whim of the Force. Even if he had only been doing it for almost three years, each battle had been grinding and painful with each of those years feeling like decades. Only his trips to Hapes when the Senate was in recess had preserved his sanity; and what he hoped was whatever was left of his humanity. Nelani and Seha also helped, acting as his moral compass whenever frustrating red-tape or corruption sunk a bill that could have helped millions.

Yes, the past few years had definitely not been fun, and Jacen would be the first to admit that he envied his brother's enjoyment of that same period of time. First to admit he was envious that his brother had a family, children, a place to call home.

Home for him was wherever he happened to get a room, be it a Denon apartment, the living quarters of the *Falcon…*in the arms of a beautiful, red-haired Queen Mother.

The thought of Tenel Ka caused Jacen to close his eyes, his chest clenching painfully. Tenel Ka, his daughter Allana, he suddenly wanted more than ever to wrap his arms around them and hold them like he had seen Anakin hold Tahiri and Cassa earlier. Through his Force bond, he could feel Tenel Ka lend what support she could, before events forced her to break the connection and focus on the present. But that wasn't nearly enough.

"Jacen," Anakin used *their* bond to communicate his support. Through it, Jacen could feel undercurrents of both Tahiri and Cassa mimicking Anakin's actions.
Jacen swallowed thickly, his throat feeling tight. Normally, he'd be ashamed at the emotions that had slipped past his tightly controlled barriers. Already he could feel his apprentices' alarm and concern, and he did his best to reassure the two teenage girls. They almost never sensed anything from him, let alone the swell of emotion he had just let slip. His reassurance did little, and he could still feel them anxiously reaching out to him to check on his well-being
Taking a breath, he glanced almost uncertainly at his younger brother. Maybe it was the feeling of family, a reminder that he wasn't the only Solo capable of kicking the galaxy in the butt, that had caused his defenses to slip.
"We're going to get through this, Jace."
The definitive note in Anakin's voice almost made Jacen want to believe it.
Almost.
He had long since stopped believing in miraculous solutions. Had had Vergere drill into his head over and over again that hope and empathy are two of the worst things a Jedi can go into any conflict with. There was no doubt he was feeling slightly annoyed that his younger brother was going to do what he could not; save and protect his family.
Jacen could only nod, unable to verbalize any response. Once again, he knew that there was a reality he could wish for, and one that actually existed. Until Tenel Ka and Allana were safely in his arms again, he wouldn't allow himself to be swayed by false hope.
As if sensing the sudden rising of his mental barriers, Anakin took several steps back.
"Sorry," Jacen said automatically.
"Me too," Anakin's determined blue eyes met Jacen's hardened brown. "Feel up to changing this galaxy again, Jacen?"
Jacen gripped Anakin's offered hand. "Ready if you are. Maybe something will actually get done this time."
"Great, all we need to do now is recruit Jaina and gather the old gang."
"There's quite a few new faces too," Jacen reminded. They headed back towards the praxeum. "Some of them pretty good."
"As long as they know what they're getting into when they sign up for one of our crazy plans."
"Do *we* even know what we're getting ourselves into with these plans?"
"Good point."

The banter continued on, eventually mixing with the laughter and giggles of the praxeum's children as the brothers drew nearer. The two brothers were in no hurry though, reconnecting and repairing what time apart had degraded. They would always be brothers, and as the Force reaffirmed their connection to each other, they both acknowledged that fact with understanding nods of their heads. And as Jacen and Anakin emerged from the small forest, they took in the sight of their awaiting family.

In the main courtyard of the small oasis of curving white buildings, one could see Wookies Lowbacca and Lumpawaroo yowling playfully as Cassa, Jedis'sei, Janek, Ryza and several of the younger children used them as climbing structures. Leia, Mara, and Tahiri were tucked into a shaded corner, talking in hushed voices as Tahiri cradled a sleeping Jayce against her. Luke and Han were in another corner, reminiscing about the past stirred up by Anakin's return.

Not that Jacen's apprentices weren't busy either. Seha and Nelani were seated in a small circle on the sun-baked bricks of the courtyard, sharing stories and lessons with Ben, Kani, Cappricia, and the older students still left at the praxeum.

The Ossus Praxeum was once again a place for family, for recovery and healing. A place to recharge and gather oneself before striding out into the galaxy once more. Force knows, its occupants would need every ounce of strength to face the storm that was to come.

}-(Chapter End)-{

Turi

}-(I)-{

Glancing outside the office window towards the rising sun, one would think Jedi Ambassador to the Imperial Remnant, Jedi Knight Turi Altamik, was in the lap of luxury. Towering spires of gleaming black gilded with gold and platinum frames soared high into the yellow sky. Picturesque, white-stone walkways—every stone placed with extreme care—lined with finely manicured trees and bushes. A fountain bubbled at one point; a lake gleamed on the opposite end, a tiny stream connecting the two down the center of the pathway.

Yes, much had changed on Taspir III since Voster Quille was elected Grand Moff; a position similar to the role of 'president' or 'chief of state' to other non-Imperial governments.

Then again, many things had also stayed the same.

"Listen, Representative Solen. Grand Moff Quille has heard your complaints, but quite frankly, it *is* within his right to disband any organizations in the Empire. This issue is out of my hands."

"Please, Jedi Altamik! If the United Front for Imperial Refugees is disbanded, what will happen to the three point seven million refugees we still look out for? How can the Grand Moff call our organization a threat to the Empire when all we do is petition the moffs to give these refugees the break they desperately need."

Turi rubbed at her forehead, shaking her head slowly. "I wish I can help, Solen. I really do. But the Jedi Order is not supposed to tell other governments how to run or manage their people."

"Then what <u>are</u> you supposed to be doing? Not that I'm not grateful for the work you and Jedi Knights Arelis and Bann do. I mean, you even helped to settle a majority of our people. But..."

"Jedi can't work miracles no matter how hard you want them to," Turi hissed, a hand curling into a fist beneath the desk. "We *can't* save everyone. The nearly fifteen million people we helped settle over the past four years were lucky. The remaining three, not so much. I can try to force the Moffs to do what you want, but then I'll have used up all of my favors and good will with them and won't be able to protect those fifteen million if the Moffs decide to go after them."

"And who gave you the right to play god? Deciding which people get to live or die. Who gets a home and who doesn't."

"You did, Representative," Turi said bitingly. She was fed up with helping out, then being blamed if the people she was helping didn't get their way. "The moment you decided to rely on the Jedi Order to get the results *you* couldn't. You didn't have to come to us. Just like I could have refused you when you first did. But the funny thing is, Jedi are just like every day people, only with several thousand years of tradition that basically forces us to be the galaxy's wet-nurse. I've done all I can for you, Solen. My advice, start doling out the remaining refugees to the other aid-groups. Then get clear of Imperial Space before the Grand Moff decides to arrest you for sedition."

The leader of the refugee group glowered at Turi, and then powered off his side of the communicator. Releasing a deep breath, Turi looked apologetically to the two sitting just outside her office.

"Apologies Moff Rezer, Moff Tanal," Turi said, her voice oozing with artificial politeness. "Not everyone is happy with the latest measures passed by the Council."

"Perfectly understandable." Rezer's smile was every bit as icy as the cold look in his eyes. "But these are trying times. The non-humans should learn that we are sacrificing much letting them have the comforts they still have left."

"Of course, the Chiss aren't making it any easier," Moff Evelyn Tanal said conversationally. She settled into the black leather couch on the

opposite side of Turi's desk. "They should learn to leave well enough alone."
"I thought you agreed that the attacks in the Velcar and Presfbelt were…"
"Oh we've agreed it was probably the Killiks," Evelyn waved a hand dismissively. "But that still hasn't stopped the Chiss from sending practically every single ship they have to the Imperial-Chiss border."
Turi kept her smile plastered in place as she called on the Force to hide her fatigue. Dawn had barely broken, and she wasn't exactly in the mood for the usual blustering from the moffs. "But the two of you haven't come to complain about the audacity of the non-humans, have you?"
"It passes the time," Rezer shrugged. "Much of what is wrong with the Empire at the moment can be attributed to the non-humans. When that issue is taken care of, the Empire can return to its days as a galactic superpower."
"Yes, yes. And we'll have fleets in every corner of the galaxy, and everyone will once again be in awe of our might," Turi gestured impatiently. "I've seen the same propaganda vids too."
Evelyn chuckled. "To business then. Moff Rezer, would you like to start us off?"
"Yes," Rezer nodded. "As Evelyn mentioned, the Chiss have been building up their forces along the Perrinn-Velcar-Prefsbelt front. Now the Chiss have yet to make any aggressive maneuvers, and the chatter we have picked up seems to indicate that this might be a simple show of force."
"Right, *they* might be worried that while they're handling the Killik situation, the Empire might take advantage. Jedi Knight Solo explained as much to me."
"Unfortunately, with the Jedi Ambassador to the Chiss currently away, the Aristocras appear to be taking advantage of the situation," Evelyn slid a datapad across the crystalline surface of Turi's desk. "From what we can tell, every ship, save those performing essential duties, have been moved to our shared border. The Moffs who control the Perrinn, Velcar, and Prefsbelt sectors have responded in kind and moved their own fleets to the border."
"I hate to say it, Jedi Knight Altamik, but war with the Chiss seems almost inevitable," Rezer said with badly acted regret. "Words can only do so much, and our people are fed up with the audacity of the Chiss."
"Opinion polls conducted suggest seventy percent of the Empire supports a war that will put the Chiss in their proper place," Evelyn nodded, a similar look of mock sympathy on her face.

Turi very carefully kept her face locked in a congenial expression. "Do those citizens who voted in that poll realize what a war would cost the Empire? Despite the gains in territory since the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War, we're barely able to feed all of our planets as it is; and that's not counting those millions still stuck in ships orbiting devastated worlds. A war would likewise drain credits from those devastated worlds and prolong the current state of disrepair the Empire is currently in."
"On the flip side, at least the people have someone to channel their anger and frustration at," Rezer replied evenly. "Their hate brings them together and gives them focus. Without it, they truly will see that the Empire still has a long way to go before we return to the glory days."
"I appreciate the fact that you are briefing me of the situation, but I still don't see where *I* come in."
"Since the Empire is a part of the Galactic Alliance, and the Chiss Ascendancy is not, we would like the Jedi Order's assurance that the other Galactic Alliance member-states will remain out of this purely Imperial matter. This is a matter of our foreign affairs and that of an outside entity. We have no wish to bother the rest of the galaxy with our problems," Evelyn answered.
"You're essentially asking the Jedi Order for a blessing to go to war," Turi summed up.
"And since the Jedi Order is essentially the Galactic Alliance's governing body, we expect the Jedi Order and their allies to honor the laws of the Alliance and remain separate of this issue."
"Will that, by extension, include myself, and Jedi Knight's Arelis and Bann?"
"That will be up to the three of you," Evelyn smiled frostily. "You can either continue to do your duty in aiding the Empire or stay out of its way. Play with those non-human refugees if you must. But the Grand Moff has plans at work, and we will not appreciate any interference."
"You overheard my holocall earlier, no doubt," Turi gestured to the holoemitter on her desk. "I know how things work here. Favor for a favor. You want me to tell the Jedi Order to mind their own business, I'll need something in return."
"Oh?" Rezer's thin eyebrows rose.
Turi's green eyes glinted predatorily. "Repeal the latest amendment to the Imperial Charter. The Empire has no need to construct prison camps to hold non-human refugees, or develop a registry to keep track of non-humans. Instead, use the funds that would have gone into those projects to get the remaining non-human refugees settled in a civilized manner."

"And just why would we ever agree to this?" Rezer said with an incredulous scoff.
"Three reasons," Turi said with a sharp tilt of her head, holding up three fingers. "The Empire wants to go to war. Which is smarter, having several million settled people content with their lot in life, or several million disgruntled people roaming around the Empire without much hope of bettering their lives?"
"And the other two reasons?"
"Several million people, whether they're human or not, is one heck of a workforce. Sure we have droids and automated processes that build most of what we need, but if you want to free up humans for the Imperial armies, you'll need the refugees to take their places. Lastly, I need something tangible to show the Jedi Order. So long as you're treating your own people well, whether they're human or otherwise, they won't have too many grounds to do more than protest any eventual war."
"I must say, Jedi Altamik, you really do understand how the Empire works," Evelyn said sarcastically.
Turi's grin was just as genuine as the moff's voice. "Fortunately, no?"
"We'll have to discuss this with Grand Moff Quille, of course," Moff Rezer said coolly. "It will take some convincing to get the other moffs to likewise repeal the amendment."
"Then you best get on it then," Turi said, her green eyes glimmering coldly. "Who knows when the Chiss will get fed up with Imperial posturing and live up to the animalistic picture the media paints them as."
"Then we will excuse ourselves. Good talking with you again, Jedi Knight Altamik."
"Likewise."
The door closed behind the two moffs, and Turi slumped back into her chair, releasing a very long breath. The shadows under her eyes were evidence of many sleepless nights. The creases and wrinkles on her youthful face, a sign of the stress of her position. After five years in the Empire, she could barely keep track of how many times she had bent, or even broken, her own morals to get the job done. It didn't help that the moffs were all older than her and saw her as a little girl in a world full of grownups, regardless of how many times she parried their maneuvers or turned them against one and other to protect the powerless in the Imperial Remnant.
Her holocomm unit chimed, a small reminder message displaying in the air above her desk.

With another deep sigh, Turi called upon the Force to help restore her strength and stood. The day had only just begun and there was still much, much more she had to do. She glanced at her planner, rubbing the last of the sleep from her eyes. Meetings, meetings, and more meetings, all of which were of the utmost importance to one person or another. She wasn't one to shirk her duties to the Jedi Order, but she'd like to see any other Jedi last as long as she had in such a toxic, literally and figuratively, work environment. Not that complaining or feeling sorry for herself would do any good.
Wondering if she had time for a light breakfast before her plethora of meetings, Turi stood, stretched and prepared herself for what would most likely be a *very* trying day.
}-(II)-{
The sounds of machine work echoed noisily, nearly drowning out the voices of her guide. All around her in the Sienar Fleet System factory of Taspir III, assembly lines were working at full speed piecing together countless numbers of fighters, gunboats, and smaller capital ships. Most of the systems were automated, blue and white sparks flying as welder droids affixed bits and pieces to one and other, pneumatic hammers pounding other pieces into place, with other droids moving the piece onwards. It was a loud place, full of the smell of smelted metal and burnt wiring. And unfortunately, the place her current assignment took her.
"So you see, Jedi Knight Altamik, with the roll-out of the Twin-Ion Engine Starhunter interceptor model, and the increased production of the Scimitar bombers, the Empire has once again regained a tactical advantage in the region." Her guide, heir to the Santhe Corporation, Evander Santhe, explained. "The Starhunters are more than a match for the Eta-Fives currently in use by the Galactic Alliance military. They are the next step in the evolution of the TIE Defender and Interceptor lines. Two-thousand have already been produced and are in service, with another ten thousand on order. The Starhunter represents the pinnacle of Imperial engineering. Not to take anything away from the Scimitars though. Our Scimitar assault bombers have only one ion engine, yet can reach speeds faster than any Imperial bomber in existence. Its advance armament and shielding systems makes it stand head and shoulders above most bombers this day and age."
"Impressive, very impressive," Turi nodded for show. "Considering the Starhunter was still on the drawing board as recently as five months ago, I'm surprise Sienar Systems are mass producing them already."
"Well, yes," Santhe gestured to the assembly lines above their heads. "As you know, the Chiss have been causing trouble for the Empire.

Their Clawcraft, I hate to say it, frankly outclasses all but our most expensive fighters. If we were to go to war, we needed a counter to their technology, something even more advanced and capable of undeniable results. After the incident with the Tion Hegemony, the Council of Moffs approved the basic design of the Starhunter and transferred a great deal of credits to make those drawing board plans a reality. The Chiss will serve as an example to all those who would dare question the Empire's power."
Turi closed her eyes for a fraction of a second, nodding weakly. "Of course. I guess that also explains the roll-out of the *Turbulent*-class Star Destroyers five years ahead of schedule?"
"Yes," Evander nodded. "If we are to be a power to be reckoned with, we cannot be using the obsolete *Victory* and *Imperial I* class Star Destroyers. This galaxy is advancing, and the Empire is only just catching up after spending years fighting amongst ourselves and in decay."
"All thanks to Grand Moff Quille," Turi said understandingly.
"Yes, we are grateful to have a man like he leading us into the future. Well, that concludes the tour. What is it you've come here for, Ambassador Altamik?"
"A matter of unpleasant business, I am afraid," Turi produced a datapad from her robes. "This is a collection of reports from pirate sweeps across the galaxy."
"Ah," Evander's thin face took on a regrettable façade . "I think I know where this is going. Our people have already told all we know to the Galactic Alliance and Imperial investigators. We simply do not understand how our fighters, even TIE Advance-line models ended up in the hands of these pirates. We keep strict tabs on all spacecraft that leave our factories, until they reach their buyers, and every one of them has been accounted for."
"I know, I've read the reports," Turi placated, holding out a hand to stall the corporate leader. "And I'm actually inclined to believe you. A recent raid on a hidden pirate base in the Sinton system by the Galactic Alliance's VibroSword squadron managed to capture several TIE-line fighters intact. I convinced my superiors that we needed an expert opinion on this, so I took the liberty of downloading our techs' analysis of the captured fighters."
Evander scrolled through the data, a small frown on his face.
"You've noticed it, right?" Turi said mildly.
"It is hard not to," Evander looked up with a confused expression. "Outwardly, the fighters do appear to be Sienar's; the solar wings, the

spherical cockpit, right down to the computer systems and twin ion engines. All of it *looks* as if it came straight from our factories."
"But," Turi prompted.
"But everything else is definitely not up to spec. I would normally chalk this up to miscreants getting their hands on surplus parts and bastardizing our designs, but this…this looks far more complex. In fact…" Evander trailed off as he continued to review the information .
"In fact, some of what was done to these fighters actually improved on our design. Power consumption is half of what a standard TIE/LN Starfighter would normally use, and the weapon systems appear to be derivations of Chiss technology, making them doubly powerful."
Turi inwardly groaned. "So what does that mean?"
"I…I don't know," Evander shrugged helplessly, still going through the information. "I should be relieved that the fighters being used by the riffraff of the galaxy aren't from my factories, yet at the same time I am at a loss. The wiring of the fighters is not like anything I've seen before, yet they maintain a uniformity, leading me to believe that these fighters were massed produced with this specific design. In any case, I must report this to the Council of Moffs. Some of these designs can be used to upgrade our existing fleets of TIE-line starfighters and I'll need their permission and credits to do so."
"When you make your report to the moffs, can you stress that the weapon systems were *derivations* of Chiss tech and not actual Chiss tech themselves?" Turi requested.
"Of course, of course," Evander waved her off, engrossed in the datapad. "The differences are very pronounced anyways and the tech could just have easily come from the Ssi-Ruuvi Imperium. I do have one question though."
"Yes?"
"In the four years since the pirates have made a nuisance of themselves, why is this the first time we are learning about the makeup of their fighters?"
"I think these ones are relatively new," Turi explained, showing she was guessing by shrugging as well. "As in within-the-past-year new. After all, we have captured intact pirate bases and their fighters before, but these ones were the first ones we've seen with those modifications."
"And you said the Sinton system is where they were found?"
"Yes," Turi nodded.
Evander scowled for a moment.
"What's wrong?"

"These modification, the way these fighters were designed, they weren't put together piecemeal, but deliberately designed in this manner. If I were a gambling man, I'd bet my company that there is some sort of factory for these…ships. The same factory that's churned out the TIE Advance and TIE line fighters our forces have seen in the field."
"The problem is, intelligence units from nearly every government have scoured the known galaxy for such a factory," Turi replied. "For any sign of how advanced weaponry and tech have made their way into pirate hands. For the source of all the pirate activity. They've searched for four years and have turned up absolutely nothing. The Battle at the Utegetu Nebula last year was the only outlier, and even then minimal information was gleaned from that event."
The head of Sienar Fleet Systems ran a hand through prematurely graying hair. "Then I can only say this. Unless that factory is found soon, the pirate problem will only increase. Emperor help us all if the pirates begin producing modified Defenders and other advanced fighters."
"Thank you taking the time to see me and confirming the intel reports," Turi breathed, her eyes briefly tracking around her to the busy assembly lines. "I won't take up any more of your time."
"Good luck, Jedi Knight Altamik," Evander said solemnly. "Sienar Fleet Systems may profit greatly from a war between Chiss and Imperials, but even we know what will happen to the Empire's economy should the war last longer than anticipated."
"But you won't do anything to stop it," Turi pointed out.
"It's not in our place to dictate to our customers what they should do with our products."
"Of course. Well, Director, I must be going. It's been a pleasure as always. Give my regards to the Council of Moffs."
"Until next time then," Evander waved a hand . "Hopefully you'll have better news."
Turi let her gaze linger on the many assembly-lines hard at work slapping together everything from fighter to capital ship parts. With machine-like efficiency, each part was passed on to another station and then added to, in a seemingly endless march of metal and machines. There was no questioning what they would all be used for. A government in peacetime had no need to create thousands of additional fighters. A government in peacetime could have used the credits spent rush-developing the top-of-the-line TIE Starhunter for the many worlds under its protection that still needed aid. And as her eyes

trailed over to the end of one of the assembly-lines, she saw completed TIEs by the dozen being loaded up and whisked away. Turi grimaced. She hated when she was right. The Empire was preparing for a war. A war where no one would truly 'win.'

}-(III)-{

"I understand that the Jedi cannot condone a war, Master Katarn, Master Korr," Turi said with an impatience she didn't bother to hide. "But the Empire is going to war in any case, and when I tried to reach Ambassador Solo, I was told she was no longer in Ascendancy space. The Chiss cannot stop this. Nor can the Galactic Alliance in any case. It's a small sacrifice, don't you think? Our word and support for the well-being of millions?"

"'Our word' is not something that can be bartered," Jaden Korr said shortly. *"If the Jedi were to give 'our word,' we'd be as good as saying that the Galactic Alliance supports a war against the Chiss. A war that, if I have to remind you, has no legal basis. We'd be trading the deaths of countless millions in exchange for the 'well-being' of the few million our word would 'save.' Even then, there's no guarantee those few would make it through the war in the first place. The Jedi Order..."*

"Is damned near incompetent!" Turi hissed in aggravation. "I'm sorry, but you assigned me to look after Jedi interest in this sector. Protecting those that can't protect themselves, ensuring the Empire plays nice with its neighbors, preserving the peace, and all that rot that looks good for the history holos. But none of you have actually been out here the past four years and seen what this place is like, seen what the leaders are like. You want me to save people? That comes at a cost. You want me to preserve the peace? The Jedi Order won't have a presence out here much longer if I do. Play nice with our neighbors? How can I do that when both the government Jaina Solo works for, and the one I work for, barely tolerate our presence? Hells, in the time I've been with the Empire, they've not only played well with most of their neighbors, they damned well annexed most of them. You tell me what I'm supposed to do about this situation then. Because it's so obvious that the only thing the Galactic Alliance Senate and High Council can agree on is what *not* to do."

"You're out of line," Jaden said warningly.

"And I don't give a damn," Turi shot back, green eyes glimmering with tears of frustration. "You want to replace me, do it. But I'm *trying* to keep as many people alive and happy as possible. If the Jedi Order weren't so far up the arse of the Galactic Alliance bureaucracy, maybe they'd be able to do the same. "

"Jedi..."

"You say that a war will happen regardless of what we say?" Kyle interrupted his former apprentice.
"Quite sure," Turi said tiredly. She fiddled with a datapad for a moment. "I'm sending you over my latest estimates of the strength of the Imperial fleets. As you can see, they're three times the pre-Vong War numbers. The Empire isn't building those ships and increasing recruitment quotas for a lark. And that, coupled with an uptick in anti-non-human sentiment, means that the anger can only be directed towards one target. The moffs are humoring us at the moment, trying to see where we'll stand; with them or against them."
Kyle and Jaden both looked over the information, troubled frowns appearing as they did.
"These numbers…how certain of them are you?" Kyle asked.
"Very," Turi sighed. "I double-checked them after Ambassador Solo gave me her estimates for the Chiss fleets. The Chiss will be ready for the Empire, but in two to three years at the earliest. The Empire has the numbers it needs *today.*"
"We'll have to talk with the rest of the Galactic Alliance Senate and the High Council about this. The next meeting convenes in three days."
"Right, until then, I'll just tell the Council of Moffs not to go to a war they'll statistically win."
"Turi." Kyle said tiredly
"Sorry again," Turi muttered, looking downwards.
"You're doing a good job with the resources you do have," Kyle said gently. *"Bastion would still be a graveyard planet if it weren't for your efforts. Several dozen million refugees would still be trapped in ships or deserted balls of space rock if you hadn't stepped in. You <u>are</u> making a difference, Jedi Knight Altamik. Even if it doesn't seem like it at times."*
"Yeah," Turi swallowed heavily, forcing a smile to appear. The affect was ruined by a few stray tears that escaped her eyes.
"Aren't Jedi Knight Avinoam Arelis and Kunor Bann helping shoulder some of your burdens?"
"Sure," Turi wiped at her tears, her cheeks flushing slightly in embarrassment. "Kunor is over on Bastion overseeing things there. Avinoam is busy keeping the newly acquired neighbors from being completely steamrolled by the Council of Moffs. That still leaves said council and the rest of the Empire to me."
"One moment, just getting word from Jedi Masters Solusar and… Skywalker?" Kyle blinked in shock. *"And I thought he had retired from the political scene."*
"What's going on?"

"You may get your wish, Turi," Kyle said, scrolling through information somewhere off camera. *"An emergency meeting of the High Council is being called. Eleven hours from now Kam Solusar has requested every member of the High Council attend."*
"Well, eleven hours is easier than three days at least," Turi shrugged. She distractedly reviewed her mental checklist of everything the council needed to know about the state of the Empire.
"There's something else," Kyle said intuitively.
"It's the Empire, when is it ever one-dimensional?" Turi replied with false cheer. She then sobered. "It's about Project Singularity."
"The project Grand Moff Quille tried to initiate, restarting the Reborn and Inquisitorious?" Jaden spoke up.
"Right in one," Turi nodded once.
"Didn't you convince the Council of Moffs not to back that proposal?"
"That I did."
"But..."
"But he still hasn't given up his push for Force-sensitive soldiers loyal to the Empire."
Kyle raised an eyebrow. *"Is this one of those things you're telling us after the fact?"*
Turi looked abash as she nodded again. "The good news is that the eight, missing Force-sensitives from this corner of the galaxy are no longer missing."
"Turi..."
"Okay," Turi breathed out slowly. "Ever since the Tion Hegemony incident, where Imperial and Corellian forces clashed, the Empire hasn't looked too favorably on Corellia. When Corellia began boasting about their very own Jedi Praxeum, the Empire became a touch envious. Sooooo….rather than go to the Jedi Order, they went to their own Intelligence division and started up an academy for Imperial Jedi. It's now entering its sixth month of operation."
"And the reason you're telling us this now?"
"General Dorja, the commander in charge of the academy, is offering a flag of truce if you will. She's willing to let the Jedi Order contribute to the curriculum if the Jedi Order officially recognizes the Imperial Jedi Academy and agrees to send any Force-sensitive individual found in Imperial space to said academy. I couldn't tell you otherwise because I was sworn to secrecy, most of the Empire doesn't even know about the academy, and…well, I rather like what they've done so far."
"Okay, for that, Jaden or myself will have to see the academy personally before we can make any decision. The last thing we want is

an academy for dark siders helping and Empire conquer other peoples."
"General Dorja anticipated that and extends her welcome."
"After the High Council meeting early tomorrow morning, I'll swing on by the Remnant," Kyle said, running a hand through his beard. *"It should be interesting to see Taspir Three again. I'll also help you brief the Council of Moffs on where the Jedi Order stands with their probable war with the Chiss."*
"I'll see you then, master," Turi inclined her head briefly.
"*Take care of yourself, Altamik,"* Kyle gave a brief two-fingered salute, then ended the transmission.
}-(IV)-{
In hindsight, Turi desperately wished she hadn't taken a stroll after lunch. It seemed like a good idea at the time. It had rained earlier that morning, so the atmospheric pollution and smog had dispersed for a merciful few hours. There was a cool breeze that accompanied the post-rain-soaked city, temporarily devoid of the usual toxic and noxious smells such a breeze normally carried. And, barring an unscheduled emergency, her schedule was clear for that single hour she had for herself.
Perhaps she should have spent that time in her quarters meditating. Or occupied herself with lightsaber katas; not that her blade skills were anything to boast about. Or that she had even had a reason to use those non-existent skills these past few years.
Keeping out of trouble that required a lightsaber was something she preferred. It was rather pleasant not being shot at, swung at, or threatened with mortal peril. She was well aware that she was more bureaucrat than Jedi, and that her skills with the Force had definitely lessened as she spent more and more time in back rooms hammering out deal after deal.
So it was why she momentarily froze at the top of a staircase, her mid-day walk through one of the bazaars of Taspir III's capital interrupted by a flurry of motion.
"Listen up! All non-humans, stop where you are and present your identification papers!" A human Imperial officer barked out. "Failure to comply means immediate detention and confiscation of the property on your person!"
Behind him, three units of stormtroopers, each being led by a stormtrooper in black armor, surged forward into the now panicked crowd. The officer drew a blaster pistol and fired it into the air. "Stay where you are. If you have your papers, there's no need to fear. This

security sweep is to ensure that there are no terrorist elements hiding among you."
Turi remained frozen at the top of the stairs she was on, taking in the sight below her. Stormtroopers roughly pushed through one non-human after another, turning over carts full of goods or toppling over stands in front of stores.
"This is outrageous!" A yellow-skinned Twi'lek called out in protest. "We're citizens of the Empire! You cannot…"
The officer's blaster rang out again, the ruby beam narrowly missing the protester's head. "Take him into custody, for defying a command of an officer of the Imperial Army."
More angry shouts filled the market place, the crowd outnumbering the Imperial forces three-to-one. The crowd began to surge forward, curses and debris flung at the Imperials.
"Form ranks!" The officer barked.
Immediately, the three units of stormtroopers formed a triangle around the officer, blasters pointed outwards. The sound of blasters charging stopped the crowd in their tracks.
The officer glowered at the crowd while a black-armored stormtrooper called for backup. "For menacing members of the Imperial Army, all of you are now under arrest."
Turi wasn't quite sure where the third group of individuals appeared from, but a mob of unruly human youth suddenly began barging through one of the many market streets. A mob armed with flaming bottles of alcohol, welding torches, and all manner of improvised weaponry. They rounded the corner and all paused as they took in the situation. After a brief second, the leader of the new group turned back to the others.
"Drive the inhuman bastards back!"
"For the Empire!" Another youth yelled in agreement. The mob streamed forward, projectile weapons opening up on the crowd of merchants and shoppers.
Panic immediately filled the air. Some of the crowd as trapped between the mob and the group of stormtroopers and began stampeding towards the latter in sheer terror. The stormtroopers, afraid of being overwhelmed, did the only thing a panicked force of armed individuals would do, they opened fire.
Chaos broke out, with some of the non-human crowd trying to fight back, and others just trying to run for their lives.
"In the name of the Emperor, drive them back to the holes they came from!" A gleeful howl came from the crowd of Imperial youths. One of the teens hurled a flaming bottle at a speeder full of an Ithorian family.

Two other speeders trying to pull away were besieged as more youth climbed on top and began banging on the cockpit.
The stormtroopers and Imperial officer weren't making anything better by trying to arrest pretty much anyone who came within arms' reach. Fires broke out. The sound of glass shattering and power conduits erupting crackled over the whine of blaster and projectile weapons' fire. Screams and guttural calls turned the peaceful market place into a nightmarish scene.
And through it all, Turi could only stare blankly, unable to believe what was happening. It was surreal, impossible. Even when a stray laser shot zipped by her, Turi couldn't get her feet to move in any direction. For a moment, her mind flashed back to the Yuuzhan Vong War, when she had been just a frightened teenager running from one world to the next.
On one of her 'safe' havens, a distant moon on a distant planet in the Outer Rim, the Yuuzhan Vong had landed. They plowed through the local militia with laughable ease and proceeded to massacre and enslave the planet's population. She had been there first hand, watching the slaughter unfold. Watching people flee only to be cut down by amphistaff or razor bug. Witnessing the buildings burn, homes annihilated. And she had been completely helpless, unable to do anything, save anyone. All she had been able to do was hide behind a thick growth of trees on a hill overlooking the village. Hide and watch the terror unfold.
The screams she heard then seemed to merge with the screams she was hearing now. And she suddenly felt the strength leave her legs. Hands went slack at her side and beads of sweat broke out across her forehead as the only thing she could do was sit at the top of the steps and watch once more.
She wasn't aware of just how long she was sitting there until she felt a hand on her shoulder. Blinking once more, she jerked her head around in surprise. Twilight had set upon the capital city of Taspir III, the last traces of the sun slowly sinking below the horizon. In that dying light, however, she saw the concerned silhouette of her master.
"Master Katarn?" Turi said hoarsely, finding herself oddly incapable of standing. She glanced back towards the market place; it was empty save for the cleaning droids sweeping the street.
"Hey, what did I tell you about taking care of yourself?" Kyle asked tenderly.
Behind him, Jan Ors held out a steaming cup of what smelled like caf. "Here."

Turi took the cup, but her hand shook so badly that the contents spilled. She stared at the puddle of caf on the stone ground for a long moment, before confused green eyes looked up with bewilderment. With a forced laugh, she shook her head "What's wrong with me? I can take the worse the Council of Moffs can throw at me, but I go to pieces like this over nothing? Anyways, what are you doing here, Master? I thought you had an emergency High Council meeting to attend."
"I sent Jaden in my place," Kyle answered, shrugging off his own Jedi cloak and draping it around Turi. "The Force was telling me that my apprentice needed me more."
Turi swallowed heavily, unable to help but shiver despite the warmth of Kyle's cloak. "Thanks."
"Anytime," Kyle murmured, rubbing her back.
"I'm sorry," Turi whispered, her eyes closed.
"For what?"
"Making you come all the way out here. I had things under control."
"Right," Kyle said disbelievingly.
After a moment of silence, Turi looked away. "Didn't think the war had gotten to me like some of the others."
"If you want the truth, Turi, a part of the reason why I had the High Council station you out here is because the Empire was one of the more stable places in the galaxy at the time," Kyle said, his voice containing a calming element. "I'm not sure if you remember, but at the end of the war, when you finally emerged from your latest hide away, you were as shell-shocked as some of the troopers who had participated on the assault of Coruscant."
"All of that's a blur to me," Turi answered back, picking at a hole in her robes. It must have been from a stray round or laser, as the hole certainly hadn't been there this morning when she had talked with the moffs. "Faces, places, days going by fast and slow. Running, fearing, existing. I remember going to bed, and waking up, and one day, I'm on Taspir III and the war is all behind me. The only thing I can do is keep marching onwards."
They were silent once more, watching as the light and smog-polluted sky made the distant stars faint and near-impossible to see.
"Why don't you show Jan and I this embassy the Empire gave you. I've heard it's one of the better ones," Kyle patted Turi affectionately on the back. "And while we're here, you might as well show off this Imperial Jedi Academy."
Turi smiled faintly. "Sure thing, boss." She took a deep breath, and this time she managed to stand on her own two legs. Another breath and calming Force touch of her master, and she was able to walk again.

She held out a hand and was relieved to see that it had stopped shaking. "Strange, I went seven years without any problems. It's going to be a small annoyance if I start freezing at every conflict I see."
"Call upon your bonds with Kunor and Avinoam," Kyle advised. Their trip back through the downtown region was slow and steady. "I sent them here to help you, in more ways than one. A Jedi within a meld is much stronger, can endure much more, than a single Jedi on their own."
"I'll try," Turi shrugged. "Not sure either of them will be too impressed by what they see in my head."
"Humor me," Kyle said patiently. "You might find that they can surprise you as well."
"As you command, master," Turi said, a small amount of her trademark sassiness returning. She glanced past Kyle to his silent wife. "I understand why he had to come out, but you didn't have to make the trip either, ma'am. Not that I don't appreciate it or anything."
Jan Ors allowed a wry smile and patted her husband's arm fondly. "Jedi Master Katarn here may be a high and mighty Jedi, but he still forgets one crucial fact every now and then. As powerful as he is, he *still* needs a ship to take him across the galaxy. I happen to own said ship, and it's stipulated in our marriage contract that I have to be present in any life-threatening missions he partakes in a misguided sense of youthfulness."
"Life-threatening?" Turi raised an eyebrow as her lips threatened to crack into a smile.
"Something about me taking out a few Imperial facilities, superweapons, and several battalions of their people a couple decades ago, that still irks the moffs," Kyle deadpanned. "I don't think they ever got around to revoking the bounty on my head, despite the peace treaty. Purely out of spite of course."
"Of course," Turi looked away to hide her grin.
"Well, that, and the fact that you seem certain the Empire and Chiss are about to do something utterly inane and Imperial/Chiss –like," Kyle tacked on.
"There's that too," Turi rolled her eyes. She turned back to Kyle, her green eyes glimmering. "Thank you both for coming, really."
"Not a problem," Jan winked.
"It's part of my job, look at the Jedi Handbook; it's chapter five, or six, I think," Kyle said glibly.
Turi winced. "You've seen my holocron?"

"Tionne showed it to me so I could see what a *great* job my apprentices in the field have been doing with recording their historic positions," Kyle said grandly.
Turi hung her head in embarrassed amusement. "Glad you enjoyed it."
"Believe me, I did," Kyle grinned. "You definitely put your unique spin to it."
"Great." Turi held her head in her hands in mock suffering. "Can we just go now? I'd rather give the two credit tour of the embassy than talk about my *'unique'* spin on things."
"After you, Jedi Knight Altamik."
}-(V)-{
The aroma of strongly brewed caf was enough to off-set the annoyance at being awakened by the monotone voice of the New Order Progressive NewsNet broadcaster.
"*Yesterday, a riot in the market place of Talzin, the capital city of Taspir Three, resulted in the loss of life of three Imperial soldiers and a dozen members of the Imperial Youth Group that had been supporting them. From the start the security force, initially sent to investigate a lead regarding possible anti-human terrorist activity, was met by a hostile crowd. Things would have been much worse had it not been for the brave action of the Taspir Three Youth Group Leader and his loyal Imperial followers. Their arrival turned the tables, and seventeen terrorist-scum have been arrested with another thirty dead. The Council of Moffs have quickly denounced the attempted uprising and pointed to it as justification for the passage of laws limiting non-human land rights and institution of a stricter identification program."*
Turi opened a single eye to see Jan Ors seated by her bed-side. "Hi."
"Hi yourself," Jan smiled whimsically. "You feeling better?"
"Felt worse," Turi shrugged, stretching as she pulled herself into a seated position.
"Caf?" Jan held out a second mug.
"Cheers," Turi took the cup and gave Jan a brief salute with it before sipping from it. She used the Force to augment the caf's rejuvenating affect on her mind and body. As she did, the HoloNet broadcast finally registered in the newly awakened part of her brain, and with it the events of the previous night. With a grimace, Turi closed her eyes and let out several deep breaths. "Really fouled things up, didn't I? I mean I was in a position to stop everything *before* it got out of control but…"
"Turi," Jan said firmly, stopping Turi's self-depreciating rant. "You know better than anyone that Jedi can't do everything. Even if you had stopped this riot, there would have always been another incident in a city or on a planet far from where you are, and the end result would be

the same. I've read your briefings, the moffs are looking for any reason to go to war with the Chiss, to increase persecution of non-humans. The trouble is more than any one Jedi Knight or Master can handle, so don't get yourself tied in knots over it. I may joke about it, but my purpose for being here is more than just being Kyle's pilot. The Galactic Alliance High Council, Jedi and the Ministers, are growing increasingly concerned about the situation out here. I'm here to get in touch with some of my intel contacts while you and Kyle play high-profile Jedi. Hopefully, we can keep the Empire from returning to what it once was as the Galactic Alliance tries to get its affairs in order."

Turi nodded silently, staring out the bay window of her bedroom. Thick gray fog prevented her from seeing much, but the emptiness of the clouds helped to settle her racing mind. There was still so much she was responsible for, so much to do. She couldn't spend much more time as a frail flower, moping over a war that had ended over seven years ago.

"Speaking of, where is my Master?" Turi reached out with the Force, but couldn't sense the powerful presence of Kyle anywhere in her spacious apartment.

Jan rolled her eyes at that. "He apparently thought it was a good idea to introduce himself to the moffs during their council meeting this morning. I haven't received any distress signals so they haven't arrested him, at least not yet."

But Turi had stopped listening at the words 'this morning,' and frantic green eyes darted towards the clock on the wall. In an almost panicked flurry, she flung her covers aside and reached for a standard Jedi robe draped over a nearby chair. "It's nearly lunch! Why didn't you wake me up earlier?"

"Jedi Knight Altamik," Jan barked, once again bringing a stop to Turi's actions. "When was the last time you had a good night's rest? Had a full meal?"

"I get by," Turi said defensively. "The only banquets I attend are social functions only, and even then the conversation keeps me from becoming too hungry."

"Turi," Jan's expression softened. "You have to take care of yourself before you can help others. Tell me, a good night's rest? A full meal?"

Turi looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror mounted on the wall across from her bed. She looked away almost just as fast, not liking the gaunt, dark-eyed person who stared back at her. "Last time I got a good night's rest was five months ago. Last full meal? Can't remember. Normally don't have time to make or pick up something with one crisis after another popping up. I pretty much live off of those

military ration bars. Have all the nutrients I need and takes little time to prepare them."
Jan just shook her head. "Really. I guess it really isn't just Kyle and Jaden then."
"Huh?" Turi finished cinching the cloth belt of her robes.
"You Jedi can look after everyone but yourselves. That settles it. You have the rest of the day off, and you'll be going to lunch and dinner with Kyle and I."
"But…"
Jan narrowed her eyes, and Turi fell silent. "If you absolutely have to do something work related, it will be taking Kyle on a very public tour of Taspir Three and then to this Imperial Jedi Academy you mentioned yesterday. Is that clear?"
Looking like a chastised puppy, Turi nodded.
"Good. This galaxy is already falling to pieces, the last thing Kyle or I want is any of his apprentices resembling it."
"I am not…" Turi trailed off at Jan's look. "Okay, fine, maybe just a little bit. Five years of dealing with thick-headed moffs will do that to anyone."
"Oh, I believe you," Jan chuckled. "It's just…"
The doors to the apartment slid open, announcing Kyle's return.
"Oh good," Kyle smirked, seeing Turi awake. "You're up."
"Master?" Turi arched a fine, blond eyebrow.
"You know," Kyle said conversationally, taking a seat in an empty chair. "I didn't think it was possible, but were you by any chance, *understating* just how bad those Imps are?"
"What did you find out?" Jan said mildly.
"That they still hold a grudge," Kyle retorted with mock sullenness. "Really, they still can't get over the fact that I caused several billion credits worth of damage and contributed to the downfall of their great empire."
"Hey, in their minds, the Empire never really fell," Turi supplied. "Half the aggravation is trying to subtly remind them that they don't rule the galaxy anymore."
"And the other half is trying to keep them from massacring the part of the galaxy they *do* have control over," Kyle finished. "You really should have told me or Jaden the truth about the moffs."
"Didn't want to sound like a cry-baby," Turi said faintly. "I mean, you trusted me to do my job, and I have. There are places in the galaxy worse off than here, and I didn't want to force the Order to expend resources on a still stable region of space. I mean, just having Kunor

and Avinoam here is a luxury considering all the places in the galaxy that need fixing."
Kyle released a long breath, "You're probably right. There's not much the Order could have done anyways. I told the Council of Moffs that the Jedi Order would not back a war with the Chiss so long as they were the aggressors. Half of them immediately began thinking of ways to provoke the Chiss into attacking. Anyways, suffice to say, you've done good work with them, Altamik. They've all agreed to postpone any invasion of Chiss space until the Chiss make the first move. Oh, and I managed to get us invited to the deployment of the brand new *Turbulent*-class Star Destroyer, the *Bloodfin.* We get to inspect the troops and all that."
"They weren't the slightest bit wary that you'd blow it up?" Turi said innocently.
"I'm sure they were. We get our own personal escort for that particular party," Kyle said wryly. "Was even given an introduction to those black-armored stormtroopers that seem to pop up all over the Remnant in recent times."
"Quille's elite corps," Turi supplied. "The regular grunts call them Void Troopers. They have cortosis and Mandolorian-iron-lined armor plating and personal cloaking devices. Fun bunch, rather silent though. A couple help train the Imperial Jedi over at the academy."
"They're Force-sensitive?" Kyle tilted his head sideways. "I didn't sense anything."
Turi allowed the first genuine smirk she had made in a while to appear. "Perhaps I should start at the beginning. Let's just say that the academy does a bit more than teach the kids how to be Jedi."
Kyle raised an eyebrow and smiled gamely. "Now I'm even more intrigued. Think they'll mind if I drop in today?"
"Not at all," Turi shook her head. "The kids are used to having different instructors every now and then."
"When you say kids…?" Jan said mildly.
"Like I told Master Katarn yesterday, all twelve Imperial Jedi are orphans. All but one is younger than sixteen," Turi explained. "Things done at the academy are also a lot different than how things are done at Ossus, Yavin, or Dathomir, or any of the Jedi Order's current institutions. I'll be happy to give you the grand tour. When are we due for the launching of the *Bloodfin*?"
"In a couple of hours."
"Okay, then we can go to the Imperial Jedi Academy after dinner," Turi said. "The night training missions are always fun."
"We *do* have the same definition of 'fun' in mind, right?" Kyle asked.

"Don't worry," Turi grinned broadly. "Even if we don't, the experience will definitely be….enlightening, for someone like you."
"Like me?"
"Old and set in his ways?"
"Ah, thanks for clarifying."
"No problem."
"Jan."
"Yes, Kyle?"
"Why do I put up with all the disrespect I get from my lovable apprentices?"
"Because you start worrying when they try to be nice to you. Normally means something is wrong and they need a very big favor from the High Council."
"Good point." Kyle looked back to Turi. "After dinner it is, Jedi Knight Altamik. I definitely look forward to seeing the Imperial way of training Jedi."
}-(VI)-{
Turi doubted anyone would say that the Empire didn't enjoy their ceremonies and displays of military might. The Council of Moffs could never resist an opportunity to show off the shiny ships and gleaming rows upon rows of stormtrooper armor at their disposal. Even if the audience was only Imperial citizens, a couple of Jedi, and a few ambassadors from systems on the verge of being 'annexed' by the Empire, the Council of Moffs spared no expense. Her ears were still ringing from the constant blaring of patriotic music that had accompanied the afternoon display of military might.
It was why she felt the greatest amount of relief as she guided Jedi Master Kyle Katarn past a row of quiet, unassuming houses high up in one of Taspir III's mountain ranges, and towards a large, mansion-like structure near the mountain's peak.
"Quite the distance from civilization," Kyle remarked, glancing over his shoulder back at the distant capital city. The glimmering lights of the factories and skyscrapers shone through the murky, polluted air in the valley below. This high up, the cool night made his breath come out in visible clouds of moisture.
"Like I said, the Imperial Jedi aren't known to many," Turi commented, stopping at a large gate. She inputted a code into a small box affixed to the adjacent wall, and the gate slid open. "Outside of the Council of Moffs, the instructors, and a few units of Intelligence personnel, this place is completely off-grid. From the type of uniforms to the curriculum, General Dorja has autonomy to oversee the academy as

she sees fit so long as the Imperial Jedi are loyal to the Empire first and foremost."
"That sounds…interesting," Kyle settled somewhat cautiously.
"They're confined to here and the village below for the most part. Though I was allowed to take a few of the older ones into the field to help investigate the attacks in the Chiss-Remnant border territories."
A low network of hedges on either side of a gravel walkway divided the courtyard in front of the mansion into different quadrants. Some of the quadrants were occupied with teenage-looking men and women practicing their marksmanship or working out. Despite the late hour and relative chill in the air, none of them seemed bothered in their loose fitting clothes.
"I thought there were only twelve initiates?" Kyle pointed out, seeing a group of seven youth jogging along a nearby dirt path that led higher up into the mountain. "I've had to have seen at least thirty kids here."
"Void Trooper initiates," Turi clarified. "They pretty much receive the same training as the Imperial Jedi, minus Force lessons. General Dorja and Grand Moff Quille see the Void Troopers as becoming eventual auxiliaries to the Imperial Jedi. Makes sense if you think of it. Instead of dropping a single Jedi in a pre-established squad, or grouping Jedi together, have a unit created around the Jedi so time isn't wasted with introductions and learning to work together. It helps that all the kids you see here are war-orphans. Each with their own axe to grind against the injustices of the galaxy, and all looking for a family."
Kyle's eyebrows were raised, but he refrained from commenting as he went back to observing the exercises around them.
A female voice sounded out by the hand-to-hand section. "*Gar an cuyi jatnese be te jatnese.* Ignore the pain, ignore the cold. Focus on your enemy, but don't forget your surroundings. Even if you are all *vode*, to go easy on your partner is a disservice. In the battlefield, do you think your enemy will go easy on your friends? On your family?"
"A Mandalorian?" Kyle gaped. The woman's sky-blue Mandalorian armor stood out amidst the black clothing worn by everyone around them.
"Mirta Gev," Turi nodded. "The Empire is paying her a good sum to handle the psychological and physical aspects of the training."
As if hearing her name whispered, the dark-haired woman briefly nodded in Turi's direction and then gestured to those she was supervising. "Heads' up, *ade*. Looks like Colonel Altamik brought us a Jedi Master."
At the rank, Kyle glanced questioningly at Turi.

"General Dorja felt that the Imperial rank-and-file would have an easier time adjusting to me if I fit into their hierarchy," Turi explained again. "Wouldn't make me a general for some reason though, even with all the things I'm allowed to do."
The two Jedi turned back to the Mandalorian and her students. The fourteen teenage students halted their exercises and lined up in an orderly row, hands clasped behind their backs military style. Of the fourteen, two stood out. The shoulders of their black shirts were Imperial red, their bearing confident, and their aura of strength was as clear as the Force-presence they were projecting.
"Master Katarn, it is my pleasure to introduce you to First Squad," Turi introduced. She motioned to the two outliers of the group. "Antalia Draco and her brother Sivan Draco are Imperial Jedi Initiates, the third generation of a family of Imperial Inquisitors. The twelve with them are their support and family."
On cue, the fourteen snapped a sharp salute.
"At ease," Kyle said cautiously. His gaze drifted over the fourteen teens, all physically fit with a determined fire in their eyes. "Interesting family."
"We're all orphans, sir," Sivan Draco spoke up, his accent crisply Imperial. "We are fortunate that General Dorja and Turi Altamik saved us from the streets. All they asked in return was that we protect the ideals upon which our Empire is founded upon."
"And they would be?" Kyle said, his caution bleeding away into pure curiosity.
"Loyalty, integrity, discipline, justice, and order," Sivan promptly listed. He then glanced hesitantly at both Mirta and Turi. The two instructors gave him the briefest of nods, and he continued on. "So long as the Council of Moffs uphold those ideals, we will protect them and the Empire they serve."
Kyle blinked very slowly, sensing a small amount of smug pride from his apprentice. "Very good, Apprentice Draco?"
"It's Flight Officer, Master Jedi," Sivan corrected. "All of us here are a part of Imperial Naval Intelligence until General Dorja says otherwise."
"Of course," A full-fledged smile broke out across Kyle's face as he laughed and shook his head. "Imperial Intelligence, that explains a lot of things."
"Master Jedi?"
"Never mind," Kyle waved him off. "Sorry for interrupting your training."
"Technically it's our free-time, sir," Antalia spoke up. "We just opt to continue our lessons. We know it will only be a matter of time before

the Council of Moffs decide to test our abilities, and we want to be as ready as we can be when the time comes. Rest makes weakness, so Instructor Gev says."
"All of our instructors want the same," Sivan added, inclining his head towards Mirta and Turi. "So they assist us even during these down-periods."
Kyle raised an eyebrow at Mirta, who just shrugged. "What? I get paid by the hour. If they want to train at night, I'm not going to stop them."
Despite her tough words, Kyle could sense that she genuinely cared for the teens and he schooled his face into an emotionless mask. No doubt the teens had picked up on this as well and were just as loyal to her.
"Well, carry on nonetheless."
"Sir," Sivan and the others clicked the heels of their boots together and resumed their exercises.
"That was unexpected," Kyle commented, falling in step with Turi as they continued to head towards the mansion.
"What? Were you expecting mini-Sith lords and ladies in training?" Turi said impishly.
"Closer to that, yes. Are you also instructing them on how to use the Force? I can't see a Mandalorian or commando teaching them that."
"I'm only here in the afternoon one day of the week," Turi shook her head. She gestured to one of the other quadrants in the courtyard, where two individuals were levitating an entire team of teenagers. One of the two waved and began walking towards them. "The main instruction is left up to the Mareks."
Kyle did a double-take. "How'd you get Galen and Rahm to come out here? I thought they were satisfied with Corulag."
"Good ol' fashion guilt," Turi said, sounding much too pleased with herself. "And I just basically batted my eyelashes and asked them *really* nicely."
"Turi," Rahm Marek chuckled. "This is a pleasant surprise."
Turi jerked a thumb at Kyle. "Brought along Master Katarn to make sure everything's above board. Unit Two coming along nicely?"
"They're getting the basics down. It's good to see you, Master Katarn. You're a long way from your high-seated throne on Denon."
"And you're a long way from Corulag," Kyle replied, shaking the younger man's offered hand.
"Blame Altamik," Rahm affectionately rolled his eyes in her direction. "She told us that if we weren't up to the challenge of covertly training these kids here, the only ones who would be training them were former Inquisitorius members. Said that father and I were the natural choice given our heritage and…unique views of the Force."

"Technically the job offer was just to Rahm," Turi elaborated, smiling in the white-blond-haired young man's direction. "But both Galen and Juno objected to his working for the Empire long-term and insisted they accompany him out here. Juno makes the supply runs to keep this place well-stocked, and Galen helps with the lessons on Force-usage."
"And here we are," Rahm motioned to their surroundings.
"So, a Mandalorian, a fringe Jedi, a couple of your fully trained Void Troopers, any other unorthodox instructors I should know about?" Kyle said, half in jest.
"Did you tell him about Kir?" Rahm asked.
"Right, former Imperial Guardsman, Kir Kanos is here three days out of the week," Turi said, turning back to Rahm to continue the conversation. "There's also Rillao, she and her son handle the healing lessons since you and your father are absolutely dreadful at that."
"Hey, if you're good enough at attacking and defending, you shouldn't need a healer," Rahm protested. "I take it you didn't tell Master Katarn about *Lord* Argor?"
Kyle, whose eyes had been darting back and forth between the exchange of the younger Jedi, cleared his throat. "Is that an actual 'lord', an 'obviously a dark Jedi' emphasis 'lord', or someone just full of himself?"
"All three actually," Turi replied wittily. "Lord Argor is a Dark Side Prophet who became a noble during his adventures in the Outer Rim. He's mellowed in his old age, so he doesn't outright teach the kids to murder, and betray their way to power."
Kyle could only stare incredulously at Turi.
"He's not as bad as Drayneen though," Rahm pointed out, seemingly forgetting Kyle was present. "She and Halmere seem to think the Imperial Jedi Academy is the birth of a new Inquisitorius."
"Which is why I had General Dorja's permission to bring you and your father into this little circus," Turi finished, the lines around her eyes crinkling mirthfully.
"This…this is just a bit too much to take in at once," Kyle finally managed. "Are you telling me that you have actual Sith and dark Jedi training these kids?"
Turi and Rahm exchanged an unconcerned look, a shrug, and then in unison said, "Yup."
"You don't have to worry about these kids going dark though," Turi added quickly. "Like you heard Sivan say earlier, their duty is to upholding the ideals on which the Empire was founded upon. They can't do that by becoming megalomaniacs with a penchant for death and mayhem."

"Not that we talk about the 'light side' 'dark side' philosophies anyways," Rahm said. "Here it's all practical lessons, no quibbling about the finer points in Force usage. We actually consulted with Master Kel of Yavin Four when coming up with the initial curriculum, and got the approval from General Dorja. Apparently, being non-Force sensitive, her view on things is that the Force just *is.* She couldn't care less about the morality of it so long as the kids know how to use it and can control themselves when using it."
After several measured breaths, Kyle exhaled deeply. "It sounds as if you have everything under control here. Why does General Dorja want to have Jedi Order input now?"
"You're joking, right?" Rahm blinked. "We pretty much said it earlier. The instructors here are commandos, mercenaries, dark Jedi, and unconventional Jedi. None of us are what you would call exemplary teachers or role models to follow. I mean, we can tell the students what we know, tell them about what we've gone through, but we play things relatively loose out here. It's good for the short term, but we'd definitely benefit from some guidance. Especially if the Council of Moffs want to make these kids a cornerstone for their 'Empire reborn'. Even us 'instructors' are mostly doing thing our own way whenever we get any one of the four squads. We've tried coordinating lessons, but we're not exactly the best at being team-players. I mean, when was the last time you've heard of a dark Jedi eagerly volunteering to work with someone else inferior to him or her?"
"Alright," Kyle sighed, rubbing at his face tiredly. "Alright. Once I talk with General Dorja to get a better sense of what she expects, I can have a couple of instructors from each of the Praxeums drop by and help you plan out some sort of schedule."
"Thank you," Rahm tilted his head politely.
Any further conversation was stopped, however, when a Void Trooper recruit came sprinting out of the mansion, making a beeline straight for them.
"Colonel Altamik!" The young teen panted.
"Take a breath, recruit," Turi barked in military fashion.
"Yes, ma'am," the recruit instinctively obeyed. "Colonel, the Council of Moffs is on the line and request your presence immediately."
"That doesn't sound good," Turi said warily. "Did they say why?"
"Yes, ma'am. It's the Chiss ma'am. They've issued an ultimatum, and the Moffs countered with one of their own. Chiss fighters were seen attacking nav and comm-buoys along the Imperial-Chiss border, and the Council of Moffs fear it's a prelude to a full-scale invasion."
"And Jedi Ambassador Solo?"

"The Moffs were told that she was indisposed at the moment," the recruit dutifully recited.
"Blast it!" Turi cursed. She glanced at both Kyle and Rahm. "Sorry about that, but duty calls."
"Mind if we sit in?"
"Be my guest," Turi's strides were long and quick. "And when I finally make contact with Jaina Solo, I need to remind that woman that *now* is a *very* bad time to be sight-seeing the Unknown Regions. Force! Just what in the Emperor's Black Heart are she and the Chiss up to now!"
}-(Chapter End)-{

Jaina II
}-(I)-{ }-(I)-{
The Chiss Ascendancy wasn't ruled by one man, by a republic-like senate, or even by elected officials. If anything, the Chiss Ascendancy's leadership could be aptly compared to the structure of organized crime families. Each family was in charge of their own aspect of Chiss society, and did not interfere in the managing of others unless the actions posed a threat to the Ascendancy on the whole. The heads of each Ruling Family would agree on the direction they wanted to take the Ascendancy, and for the most part left it to their subordinates to make it happen. At the same time, the core of Chiss society revolved around a military ethos, an ethos that also adhered strongly to an isolationist and Chiss-first stance.
Despite being among the Ascendancy for seven years, Jaina was still getting used the strictly regimented ways of doing things; a very small central government that contrasted sharply with the Galactic Alliance's own very large one. There was very little bureaucracy, merely conflicting agendas of the different families, each wanting to stay relevant and in control of their little monopoly of Chiss life.
Decorum, honor, discipline, many of the same things the Imperials valued, were also appreciated by the Chiss. It was easy to see how someone as infamous as Thrawn could gain the respect of his staff of human, Imperial officers back during his heyday. It was ironic that those traits were also what the Imperial Remnant was now using *against* the Chiss; the old party line of 'see, look at these aliens trying to be like us, we should teach them a lesson.' Despite the recent events with the discovery of the Killiks, the Imperial Remnant problem was still in the back of Jaina's mind. She had no doubt that this was not the last she had heard of it, and she dreaded the day it fell back into her lap.

"The Senate will not kill you for smiling," Jag murmured out of the corner of his mouth.
"You first," Jaina quipped absently. They were seated in a shuttle, waiting as it descended through Csilla's upper atmosphere. She was in her best Jedi robes, and he in his immaculate white, uniform of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force.
"I am the Assistant Syndic of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force, commander of the Ascendancy's primary fleets. I am not allowed to smile," Jag deadpanned.
"Oh? And what am I?"
"An amazing woman who becomes more and more beautiful every time she does," Jag replied, his jade-green gaze meeting her own wide eyes.
Jaina looked away, her face flushing. Even after all these years, after becoming lovers, Jag still never failed to make her blush like a school girl. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Jag smirk. Trying to recover some dignity, she cleared her throat. "Right, I'll just win over the Senate by being my charming, Solo self."
"The Solo from the mother's side of your family, I hope."
"Dad's been known to be a good diplomat when the situation calls for it."
"The situation does not call for it, trust me."
"*We'll be arriving at House Nuruodo shortly. Please prepare for landing procedures, Assistant Syndic Fel,"* the Chiss pilot announced professionally. With both Jaina and Jag heading to the surface, Irolia had assumed command of the *Eternal Dynast*. *"I have been ordered to inform you that Lady Fel fully expects you to report to her first before you, and I quote, 'talk your head off in meetings until your face turns Chiss-blue.'"*
"Wyn still hasn't changed," Jaina laughed.
"Unfortunately," Jagged groaned. "Ever since she followed our mother's footsteps and appeared in her first HoloVid, she's been insufferable. As if it is my fault our schedules never seem to coincide with one and other."
"The two of you *do* barely see each other, and you're practically in the same neighborhood." Jaina shrugged, her expression falling slightly. "She just misses her brother."
"Your brothers no doubt miss you as well," Jagged said tenderly.
Jaina released a small snort of air, forcing out a grin. "Yeah. I still can't believe I couldn't be there for Jacen's daughter's birth. And who knows how Anakin's doing."
"You feel them in the Force?"

Jaina closed her eyes, bowing her head slightly. "Sure, but my bonds to them have never been this weak, *ever*. We all have our duties to do though, and sometimes…sometimes sacrifices have to be made."
"You told me during your knighting ceremony that your uncle told you some words of wisdom."
"Sword of the Jedi and all that."
"All that, if I recall correctly, meant that you were a sword that faces her burdens with her brothers at her side."
"Uncle Luke can't get things right all the time," Jaina said softly. The shuttle shook as it touched down.
"Jaina."
The brown-haired young woman glanced up at Jagged questioningly. He gently cupped her chin with one of his white-gloved hands and leaned in, kissing her with the utmost of care.
"Jag," Jaina breathed.
"Some sacrifices are not worth making," Jagged whispered, he was so close to her that his lips were moving against her own. He let his thumb glide across her cheek. "When this Killik incident is over, let's use some of our accumulated leave time and visit your family again. I believe I have a couple of cousins in need of spoiling as well."
"Jag, General Antilles had his kids almost twenty years ago," Jaina laughed, fondly reaching up to caress his face. "They're adults now, probably hot-shot pilots."
"And I doubt they've ever flown an advanced Nssis-class Clawcraft with phase-adjusted maser cannons," Jag said, his confident smirk returning. "Once they fly in the pinnacle of Chiss engineering, they'll never want to return to those slugs you Galactic Alliance people refer to as starfighters."
"Once a fighter pilot with an over-inflated sense of his skills, always a fighter pilot with an over-inflated sense of his skills," Jaina sighed, patting his arm patronizingly.
The door to the shuttle finally lowered, and the playfulness in Jaina and Jag's features vanished in an instant. Gone were the smiles and relaxed manner which had been present a split second earlier. Not a hint of emotion showed on their faces as they strode purposefully from the shuttle, their presence speaking nothing but power and determination. Several junior officers snapped to attention, saluting sharply as the duo walked past, mechanics likewise pausing from their work to pay their respects.
Another Chiss officer approached; datapad in hand and an official air about him. Jaina and Jag stopped, waiting for the man to salute, which he did.

"Report," Jag said crisply, returning the salute. Both he and Jaina resumed their brisk walk.
"Sir, the Senate requests your presence immediately. The Jedi need not attend."
"A recommendation or an order?"
"A…recommendation, sir."
"Anything else?"
"The supplies you requested for the investigation of Killik activity in the uncharted regions have been held up pending the outcome of the Senate meeting."
"Understood, you are dismissed."
"Sir," the officer saluted and spun about on his heels.
"That doesn't bode well," Jaina murmured, leaving the hangar with Jagged. "Any delay in tracking down the Killiks might be one we'll regret later."
"Political games are the one side of my title I do not appreciate," Jagged agreed. "But they must be played nonetheless. Let's hope that we can gain the support of the Senate as soon as possible.
As they passed it, a door to one of the side passages opened. This time it was Jagged who snapped to attention. "Father."
"Jagged." Nearly fatally wounded by an assassination attempt during the Yuuzhan Vong War, the galaxy renowned Baron Soontir Fel was no longer the formidable warrior he had been in his youth. Though retirement from his post had eased some of his burdens, a life full of violence and intrigue had left him looking closer to eighty than the sixty-five years he actually was. Too proud to use a cane, the former soldier walked with an obvious limp. The attack had also left him blinded in one eye, and he did not see the point in expending resources to replace it with cybernetics. The end result left him looking very much like a tired old war veteran who had seen and learned too much for any one person. "Jedi Solo."
"How's your health, sir?" Jaina asked gently.
Soontir's face remained impassive and he gestured for them to continue walking. "I'm still alive, aren't I? Isn't that good enough? My son been treating you well?"
"Of course, he is a fine officer and gentleman," Jaina grinned, fondly looking to her side at an exasperated-but-clearly-trying-to-hide-it-and-failing Jag.
"Wynssa and James are in the observatory at the moment," Soontir directed the comment at his son. "I do not have to remind you of the consequences to the both of us should you fail to see her first?"

"Of course not, father," Jag replied dutifully. "Jaina and I were just on our way to see them."
"Good, good," Soontir said. "And afterwards, you are going to the meeting with the Syndics and Aristoicas."
"Yes."
"A word of caution," Soontir warned. "High Command is not thoroughly convinced that the Killiks are behind the latest disturbances. Historically, the Killiks have never showed any signs of aggression. Even when we were dismantling the other ruling families for being under their influence, all the Killik Colony did was retreat into the Unknown Regions. So for them to launch such an organized and efficient attack on Chiss military and colonial outposts seems farfetched."
"The evidence will speak for itself."
"The evidence can be manufactured by those with knowledge of the proteins and gases Killiks use," Soontir replied. "I happen to agree with you, but as you know, the Ascendancy has been somewhat…anxious… to prove to the galaxy that they should not be taken lightly."
"And by blaming the Imperials for the attack, they get around their Non-Aggression law and allow them to flex their muscle," Jaina sighed with a shake of her head.
"Yes. The need is perhaps even greater given how House Nuruodo was forced to give up territory without a single shot fired."
"We understand your warning, father, thank you."
"Enjoying my job yet, Jagged?"
"The Jedi Ambassador's presence makes it tolerable," Jag said stiffly.
"Tolerable? Consider yourself fortunate then," Soontir chuckled, shaking his head.
Looking at Jaina with intense dark eyes, Jag tilted his head in silent acknowledgement. "Very."
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The House Nuruodo palatial estate deep beneath one of Csilla's glaciers hadn't changed one bit from her previous visit. Chiss adherence to military and tradition ensured that the frozen grounds and interior were well-cared for and immaculate. Shades of blue, gray, and silver were everywhere one looked, keeping with the disciplined and ordered theme of Chiss culture.
Stepping off the underground tram-cart and onto the adjacent platform, Jaina released a breath of visible air. "Here we are again."
"Indeed," Jag said, noting the 'Astronavigation' sign above the door before them.

"I still can't believe the Chiss turned the hole I made in the wall during the war into another doorway."
"Standard Chiss efficiency. You even saved them the demolition fees of creating the hole in the first place."
"Right," Jaina smirked.
The two entered the room, following the various directional signs in silence. As they grew close to the observatory, they could hear two familiar voices echo down the stairwell.
"No! No! Don't do it! Please!"
"You have no choice in the matter. I am the one holding the blaster."
"Why are you doing this? My family gave you everything!"
"You cannot be that naïve. Your father has been manipulating my life since the start. If you won't help me, then you'll die right here like the pathetic excuse of a woman you are."
Jaina and Jag glanced at each other in bewilderment, and then quickly ran up the spiral staircase. They burst into the top floor, Jag with blaster drawn and Jaina with a hand on her lightsaber, both breathing heavily. The sight drew the both of them short.
"Really James, if you're going to help me read lines, can you do it with more emotion?" A completely unharmed and vibrant Wynnsa Fel protested, waving a datapad in the air as she lay on the observatory floor. "And I *know* the script says something a tad bit harsher than 'pathetic excuse for a *woman."*
"I'm not the actor in this room, Wyn," the translucent-haired James, said in the same dry voice he normally spoke. Lying on the floor with his head opposite of Wyn's, he was stiffly holding a similar datapad above himself; as if it were some type of alien creature that would devour him whole. "Besides, I was taught that calling one's girlfriend a 'whore' was generally frowned upon."
"This from the guy who makes me open my own doors and pull out my own chairs," Wyn shook her head in amusement. "How do you expect me to respond like I'm some kind of damsel in distress if you sound as threatening as my brother does during his little lectures?"
"Your superior acting skills. And we have company."
"Oh, hey Jag!" Wyn called out, tilting her head back to give her an upside-down view of her brother and his girlfriend. "What's with the blasters and lightsword?"
"Your superior acting skills," Jag said drolly, holstering his blaster and shaking his head. "It's been a while, Wyn."
"No kidding." Wyn pulled herself to her feet and promptly hugged her big brother. "Missed you."
"The feeling is mutual."

"Good to see you too, Jaina. This big lug taking care of you?"
"You are the second person in our family to ask that," Jag said, clearing his throat. "Is it expected that I would not know how to treat the Jedi Ambassador properly?"
"Nah, we trust you with the Jedi Ambassador, it's the girlfriend part I've had doubts about."
"He's doing just fine," Jaina laughed, accepting a hug from the younger woman. "Jag and I saw your last movie, you did great! I still can't believe that your character is based off of me, and that your writers didn't completely screw up the portrayal of the Yuuzhan Vong invasion of the Ascendancy."
"Tell me about it!" Wyn practically bubbled. "And thanks again for the crash-course in Jedi knowledge! I actually knew what I was talking about when the director told me to 'sound like a Jedi and impress the seven hells out of people' during the ad lib portions. And the fact you even lent me your lightsaber for the movie! The director knows he won't get a better connected actress for your role, so I'm currently in negotiations to do a whole HoloNet series!"
"I look forward to the 'Adventures of Jayna Solus,'" Jaina said fondly. She gestured over to the still prone form of James. "You and James been doing well in the meantime?"
"Better then well," Wyn nodded eagerly. "In fact…Jag would probably want me to spare him the details until he's out of hearing range though."
"I'd prefer it if there were no 'details' in the first place," Jag groaned, trying to glare at the clone. James, however, was utterly immune; much like Wyn was. He instead casually moved over to a computer console, paying the Assistant Syndic of the CEDF little notice. Jagged looked helplessly at Jaina, who was too busy trying to hide her laughter to help. "Your discretion is most appreciated, however, Wyn."
"No problem, big brother. Oh, by the way, James has some news for you. Right?"
"As Assistant Syndic of the Astronavigation branch, I've managed to stumble across some very interesting findings," the Force-sensitive clone began, leaning against a nearby computer. "I've heard it recently that we've been having a bug problem, so I went back to look for known Killik sightings." He reached behind him and absently tapped a few keys. The domed ceiling went black and a holographic image of the Unknown Regions appeared all around them. Several systems and hyperspace lines were illuminated in different colors.
"The Killiks are there?"

"Not quite," James shook his head. "Long-range probes and survey teams only found evidence that the Killiks passed through those zones. But look at where they are in relation to other known cultures."
"That's prime Vagaari space," Jag frowned.
"And the path they took at the southern edge is through Ssi-ruuvi territory," Jaina gestured to a second set of colors.
"The trails continue until the Outer Rim, Bakura-side and Esfandia-side," Wyn continued in a subdued voice.
"I really don't like what I think you're saying," Jaina clenched a fist. "Are you telling me that we have Killiks in the galaxy already?"
"These surveys are at least five years old," James nodded. "So unless the Killiks doubled back, yes. And given that there are no signs of a return trip, they've probably been active for quite some time."
"And how has no one picked up on this?" Jag traced one of the paths through the air.
"Each of these sightings are literally six to seven months apart, all in separate surveys and in different parts of the unexplored territories," Wyn answered solemnly. "There was no clear pattern, no reason to believe that the Killiks were up to anything suspicious, at least until the recent attacks. The fact that the Killiks weren't threatening Chiss space, or encroaching on our colonies also meant that High Command probably didn't give them a second thought. I mean, what are bugs to their new and shiny Star Destroyers?"
"Any more recent surveys?"
James shook his head. "Still compiling the CEDF information coming in from the latest attacks, but all signs say that the attackers utilized unstable hyperspace lanes that lead deeper into the Unknown Regions."
"More evidence that the attackers were Killik."
"Yes."
"There's another question that needs asking," Jaina said, the tension in her voice attracting curious glances from the others. "What happened to the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium and Vagaari Empire? The Galactic Alliance and Bakurans both reported that the Imperium went quiet three years ago. And we haven't even seen a single Vagaari saucer in five years. If the Killik's path took them through those territories…"
"The Vagaari and Ssi-ruuvi were either wiped out or became Joiners," Wyn finished.
"For once, I hope wiped out," Jaina shuddered.
James agreed with a terse nod. "If the hive minds have absorbed Ssi-ruuvi and Vagaari thought processes, the Killiks will have become a threat unlike any we've seen before."

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"It's been a year since we last saw the Ascendancy's leadership, need a refresher course?" Jag murmured.

"I think I'm okay," Jaina breathed. "Compared to other governments, it's fairly simple. Normally there are four Aristocras who lead the government, supervising a cabinet of governors and the Ascendancy Senate. The Aristocras handle inter-family relations as well as the foreign policy. On equal footing are the House leaders, the patriarch or matriarch of the family who oversees the well-being of the family as a whole. Each House leader is a member of the parliament and are used to check the power of the Aristocras. Next in command are the Syndics, who manage the Assistant Syndics and preside over the family bureaucracy. They're designated by the House leader, and make up the Council of Families to ensure that the balance of power between houses remains equal. There are now five Ruling Families, right?"

"Yes. Sabosen, Csapla, Nuruodo, and Inrokini. After the Chiss near-civil war, the Chaf family regained its former seat to appease the families that had been stripped of their status."

"I remember. They're the diplomats. Chaf'orm'bintrano was one of the few Aristocras I liked," Jaina recalled. Outside the window of their ground transport, the capital city of Csaplar whisked by, the icy streets filled with Chiss going about their business. "Sabosen's in charge of the Ascendancy's social institutions. Csapla has colonial affairs and resource distribution. Inrokini Family has the industrial and communication sectors. And of course Nuruodo has the CEDF and phalanxes."

"Yes."

"I *did* pick up a few things during our short trips back here," Jaina said with a wry smile. "Besides mom always taught me that remembering names is one of the easiest ways a politician can win points. And I have a feeling we'll need all the points we can get."

The ground transport stopped in front of a glittering blue and white building, carved out of the side of a towering wall of ice. Made even more impressive was the fact that the building not only stretched upwards, but downwards in equal distance as well. It was the heart of the Chiss Ascendancy, the closest thing they had to a capitol building where the important matters of the Ascendancy were discussed. Various transports and shuttles departed from its many docks, while Chiss in immaculate uniforms marched in formation at the forefront of the structure.

Etched over the main entryway into the ice was the symbol of the Chiss Ascendancy; three circles orbiting a central circle representing

not only Csilla and her moons, but the hyperspace lanes that connected the planets of the four original Ruling Families.
"Assistant Syndic Fel, Jedi Ambassador Solo."
"Senate Security Chief Kthira'shi'ktarloo," Jagged acknowledged the approaching Chiss and his entourage. "Here to escort us into the Senate chambers?"
"Yes. The Aristocras wished to see you as soon as possible and wanted to avoid any unexpected delays."
"For what reason did they think we would be delayed?" Jagged raised a single eyebrow.
"Unsure, Assistant Syndic. I am merely following the orders given to me."
Jagged and Jaina exchanged wary glances. "Very well, lead on."
"Good to see you again, Ashik," Jaina greeted, using the man's core-name. They entered through the towering archway at the front of the building with military precision. "Your family well?"
"It is. We may not have reclaimed our position as a Ruling Family, but it is thanks to the compromise you helped to work out that we have our place back in Chiss society again."
"I'm glad," Jaina smiled gently. "Have you heard the latest news, why Jagged and I are here?"
"Problems with the Killiks," Ashik nodded once. "Or at least, supposed problems with the Killiks."
"That doesn't sound good," Jaina prompted.
The red eyes of the Security Chief darted towards their passing surroundings for a fraction of a second. Everyone around them was going about their business and didn't seem to pay the group a second glance. Ashik took a side-step closer to Jaina and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "You didn't hear it from me, ma'am, but the Senate has doubts about whether the Killiks are actually involved."
Jaina's eyes narrowed, easily connecting the dots. His confirmation of Baron Fel's earlier warning was all she needed. "They blame the Imperials?"
"Yes," Ashik murmured. "I think the entire meeting was called so they could humiliate or be rid of the only two humans in the Ascendancy capable of affecting policy. You are well aware that the Assistant Syndic has only the bare minimum of support. Most of the Senate only supports him because it weakens Nuruodo purity to have their fleets led by a human. They're all secretly hoping that Assistant Syndic Fel does something that will disgrace his family name, and by extension, the Nuruodo family."
"Thanks for the warning."

"What warning?" Ashik shrugged, timing his next step so that it took him back to his previous distance from her. "Chiss do not care for idle rumor and gossip; it is completely unbecoming of a Chiss who does."
"Uh huh." Jaina would have laughed if it wasn't for the fact she was in a building with such an oppressive and official atmosphere. It was as if 'no laughing or smiling' was an unspoken rule in the capitol building. The fact that double-speak and hidden meanings were practically a hobby for anyone who was anyone in the Ascendancy was one of the first things she had quickly learned about Chiss politics. Taking things at face-value for the sake of propriety, and then puzzling over whether the speaker actually meant the words or not, was second nature to Chiss politicians and the upper echelons of society. Whenever she had attended an official function, which was fortunately very rarely, she couldn't say 'good day' without having the person she was addressing wonder if she wanted something in return. The Chiss were almost as bad as the High Imperials when it came to their superiority complex, and just being a human meant that she had to go the extra distance to prove herself worthy of someone's time. Even if she was a Jedi and official ambassador.
The group journeyed through the vast building made of ice and metal, exchanging stories about life on Csilla and life in space. Ashik's people were well known to Jaina and Jagged, and what might have been a stressfully silent trip was instead replaced with good spirits and a comforting familiarity.
"Thanks for the escort," Jaina gave a brief salute to the security team as they reached their destination.
"It was our honor, ma'am, Assistant Syndic," Ashik and his men returned the salute sharply. "Good luck in there."
Jaina and Jagged pushed open blue crystalline doors to reveal a circular chamber filled with the leadership of the Chiss Ascendancy. Sunlight filtered in through the translucent panel of ice on the ceiling, refracting repeatedly as it glinted off cool durasteel and ice walls until the entire room was lit up solely by its radiance. Seated along the edge of the room was the leadership of the Chiss Ascendancy, intelligent red eyes glowing. The Aristocras of the five Ruling Families were seated just opposite of the entryway, all just as immaculately dressed as Jagged and Jaina were.
"Assistant Syndic Fel, I see you brought the Jedi Ambassador with you," Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo began as the two arrivals took a seat at a metal table in the center of the room.
"I have," Jagged bowed politely. "We are here as requested, Aristocra."
"Indeed," Veeren raised a single eyebrow. "Well then, shall we begin?"

"Assistant Syndic Fel, it is our understanding that you believe the recent attacks on our colonial stations and colonies were orchestrated by the Killiks," one of the other Aristocras said.
"That is true. Evidence points to the attacks being perpetrated by Killiks."
"Circumstantial evidence," Sabosen's Aristocra said dismissively. "Gas readings and DNA evidence can easily be manipulated by a foreign power. The Imperial Remnant is known for its experimentation on living creatures and it stands to reason that they would be well aware of the Killiks and their biology."
"My colleague is correct. You found no Killik bodies, no Killik body parts, only Chiss bodies mauled or stabbed by creature or persons unknown."
"The Killiks have never openly attacked another race, nor do they have the intellect to pull off such an ambush of our forces," a Chiss senator added.
Veeren nodded with every statement made. "You see, Assistant Syndic? We cannot possibly approve of an excursion into the uncharted regions of space when there is a more immediate threat at our border with the Remnant. Our own analysts have concurred that any action we take to hunt down these so-called Killik attackers will weaken areas vital to the defense of our territory. Your request to mobilize the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force is denied."
Rather than be fazed by it, Jagged inclined his head emotionlessly. "If it is the will of this assembly, I will adhere to it."
"Then we order you to take the fleet and prepare…"
"As you have decided that the Killiks were not responsible, and have earlier concurred that the Imperial Remnant would most likely not have massacred its own people and are thus not responsible for the attacks either, we are no longer in a state of war. Having dedicated the past eight years to the Ascendancy, I shall now use my accumulated leave time which amounts to approximately one year's worth."
Veeren blinked. "You can't…"
"Then I will assume you know who the culprit is so the state of war can remain? If that is the case I will dutifully lead the CEDF and avenge our fallen soldiers, just point me to the culprits," Jagged said professionally. Not said was the obvious statement of 'you can't declare war if you don't know who to declare war on.'
"That…that is…"
"Assistant Syndic Fel," Aristocra Chaf'orm'bintrano interrupted his colleague in a measured tone. "Perhaps you should ensure that the Killiks are indeed not involved in the altercations in our border

territories. I am sure Nuruodo can spare a single, fact-finding vessel without greatly hurting its capabilities to defend the Ascendancy."
"Agreed," the Aristocra of the Inrokini family said. "We must investigate all possible leads to bring to justice the perpetrators. As unlikely as it may seem, if the Killiks somehow have become organized and advanced enough to lie waste our Colonial Phalanx guarding our outer territories, we need to know before it is too late. No one here wants a repeat of the Vagaari incursion during the Yuuzhan Vong invasion."
"Even if they were to begin investigating, they have no leads," Csapla's Aristocra objected. "They would waste Ascendancy time and resources on a fool's errand, and for what? To go chasing after a hive of space-bugs who care more for building their colonies than anyone else. We don't even know if the current Killiks hives *have* the resources to launch such an attack. We would have seen some evidence at least if that were possible."
"With respect to family Csapla, we do have a lead we might be able to follow," Jagged spoke, his voice patient and measured. "The Assistant Syndic of Nuruodo's astronavigation division put together a list of Killik sightings over the past six years. One of the paths took the Killiks directly through Vagaari territory and to the homeworld of the Vagaari, Vagar Praxut. Since that moment, Vagaari incursions have dropped considerably. It is the opinion of Assistant Syndic James and myself that something happened to the Vagaari when the Killiks passed through their territory."
"So," Veeren said carefully over the low din that had broken out after Jagged's announcement. "You would take a scouting party to ascertain the status of the Vagaari?"
"Even if nothing comes of it, I will have obtained intelligence on the capabilities of the marauders and why they have been so quiet as of late," Jagged confirmed. "But if I am able to confirm Killik involvement…"
"Then we will take the necessary measures," Chaf'orm'bintrano, said evenly. "Even a fool would be unwise to ignore such a threat the Killiks could pose, if that is the case. My colleagues and I are simply skeptical the Killiks would launch an unprovoked attack that no doubt led to many casualties among their hives. When they were working for my family and the others that had become joiners, they never showed any sign of aggression, or even the capacity for it. Even I am skeptical of the evidence, but I am not so blind as to dismiss it all without a proper investigation."

"Then it is decided," Veeren summed up. "The Assistant Syndic, the Jedi Ambassador, and a small team will venture to Vagar Praxut. In his stead, his second in command, Hess'irolia'nuruodo, shall take up position as temporary Assistant Syndic and ensure that the Imperial Remnant does not try to take advantage of the situation."
There were some murmurings of agreement among the twenty-eight Senators in the room, while others nodded approvingly.
"The Csapla family will allocate the appropriate resources for this venture."
Veeren narrowed her gaze. "Know this, Assistant Syndic Fel, should the Vagaari be at full strength, there will be no rescue mission should you become their prisoner. If they have refrained from attacking Chiss holdings due to the wisdom gained from their last follies, we will not give them a reason to resume their old habits. Especially with the Imperial Remnant posing a much greater threat."
"Understood, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to discover the truth."
"You may leave now. We will deliberate upon the appropriate supplies you will need. Expect to depart later this afternoon."
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"From an entire fleet to twelve people," Jaina murmured, eyeing the assembled group of Chiss in the hangar of the *Eternal Dynast*. The twelve were in four rows of three, standing at attention, eyes forward.
"Quite the demotion."
"A necessary one," Jagged whispered back. "As superior as the Chiss believe they are, even they aren't immune to the pitfalls of political posturing. The Killiks are responsible; we only have to show the Aristocras irrefutable proof."
"Simple," Jaina noted sarcastically. "At least we know most of the group."
"True, though I am surprised some of them were willing to leave their prestigious postings in force Spike to participate in this venture," Jagged gestured absently to the three pilots who had served with him during the Yuuzhan Vong War. "They will most likely not regain their posting when we return."
"They're following *you* Jagged," Jaina said, a hand briefly touching his.
"Us," Jagged corrected. They came to a stop in front of the line of Chiss soldiers. "Lieutenant Eprill, Lieutenant Jocell, and Commander Enton, it will be good to serve alongside you again."
"The feeling's mutual, Assistant Syndic," the lone male of the three pilots, Commander Enton Adelmaa'j, saluted in unison with the other two.

"Your presence in force Spike has been missed, sir," Lieutenant Eprill added.
"We better serve the Ascendancy by following you, sir," Lieutenant Jocell replied professionally.
It took great effort for Jagged not to straighten with pride and respect for his fellow pilots. They had been part of a group of twelve others who had traveled with him to the New Republic in the early years of the Yuuzhan Vong War. Shawnkyr had been among them, and her memory still cut deep despite the time that had passed. She also hadn't been the only one of the twelve to die in the war. Of the twelve, only seven of them had survived until the war's end. Of the seven, only five were still alive and in active military service. It was touching to know that at least these three still trusted him with their lives despite the fact he was human.
Jagged continued on down the rows of Chiss, accepting the transfer orders from each individual he passed. It was immediately clear that each of the Ruling Families were covering their own rears in case the Killik angle did play out. There was the team's medical professional, Commander Tib'alt'keti—core name Baltke—from a minor family loyal to the Sabosen Ruling Family. Ascendancy Intelligence operative Daer'ey'ath Inrokini—core name Reya. Vagaari expert Chaf'ees'aklaio—core name Feesa—niece to the Chaf family Aristocra. And Lieutenant Vero'tog'leo of Csapla—core name Rotog—the colonial territories liaison. And for security detail, four CEDF marines were along for the ride. If the entire mission wasn't already an obvious political scheme, the makeup of the team was a dead give-away.
"You all know the mission," Jagged began, addressing the line of Chiss. "We are to head into Vagaari space, to their homeworld, to ascertain why there has been no Vagaari activity within the past couple of years. Our primary goal is to locate any Vagaari to discover just what occurred when the Killiks passed through their space. Our secondary goal is to note the current condition of the Vagaari Empire as a whole. Should we encounter any trouble, we will be on our own. That is all."
The sound of footsteps echoing in the near-empty hangar punctuated his instructions, and the gathered Chiss briefly glanced at the source.
"Assistant Syndic Nuruodo," Jagged saluted.
Only Jagged and Jaina's familiarity with the woman could see the flicker of regret that was hidden behind her professional demeanor. "At ease. Have you finished with your briefing?"
"Yes, ma'am."
"Very well," Irolia glanced at the others. "Tend to your ships and see that they are ready to depart."

The others clicked their heels together and saluted sharply, before going off to do as they were told. The scouting force consisted of three older Clawcraft and the *Placeholder,* an aging picketship augmented with the latest science and sensor tech. All four craft needed to be in prime condition to handle the unstable hyperspace lanes that surrounded Chiss and Vagaari space.

With the others gone, Irolia looked off to the side. "I'm sorry…sir. I did not know my mother…"

"Irolia," Jagged interrupted. "No apologies are necessary."

"But sir, your commission and…"

"No apologies needed," Jagged repeated evenly. "I know that the fleet is in good hands, that those we cared for have a capable leader leading them. I am a citizen of the Ascendancy and will do what I think is best for it. Causing discord, especially with the many threats on the horizon, will benefit no one. You are the Assistant Syndic now, at least until I return."

"I promise to return the *Eternal Dynast* to you in the same condition that you left it," Irolia said, seemingly anxious to do something to atone for her mother's machinations.

Jagged raised a single eyebrow. "Not a scratch, Irolia."

"Not a scratch," the Chiss officer nodded once.

"You are more than deserving of the rank the senate chose to bestow upon you. The Aristocra may be your mother, but even she will not promote someone unless they are capable enough to handle the duties such a new rank requires. You will do yourself and the Ascendancy proud."

"I've had a good teacher, sir," Irolia remarked, struggling to prevent any untoward displays of emotion not fitting of an officer of her status.

"Good luck out there, Jagged Fel, Jaina Solo. I'll assign some of the fleet to the Vagaari Way, you know just in case the Imperials try something on that hyperspace route. It'll be entirely coincidental should they be in a position to assist you if needed."

"Thanks, Assistant Syndic," Jaina smiled. She held out her hand and Irolia grasped it firmly.

"Return my commanding officer to me in one piece, Ambassador. I'd like to think of him as the older brother I never had."

"Understood," Jaina nodded empathetically. "See you around the galaxy."

}-(V)-{ }-(V)-{

The trip to the heart of Vagaari territory was not an easy one. Despite Vagar Praxut being relatively close to Chiss territory, the hyperspace lanes were not the most reliable, and what normally would have been

a two day trip was in actuality a five-day non-stop session of skillful piloting. Not that the Chiss picketship or its fighter escort had to worry about that.
"You do realize the only time the Chiss have been to Vagar Praxut is in force with a full battle fleet?"
Jaina glanced up at the speaker, using the Force to continue to navigate the short hyperspace jumps needed to clear a particularly tangled nexus of hyperspace corridors. "I've realized that, yes. But I've been in worse scrapes before."
Feesa slipped into the co-pilot's chair and began making micro-adjustments to expedite their trip. In her late thirties, Feesa gave off the air of a career soldier, the epitome of stoic Chiss values. "I've spent my entire life fighting the Vagaari. Fought them alongside your aunt and uncle on the *Outbound Flight.* Fought them all the way to their homeworld alongside Assistant Syndic Fel's older brother, Colonel Chak Fel. Every cell in me at the moment says that this endeavor is needlessly dangerous and wholly unwise."
"Didn't you volunteer for the mission?" Jaina asked the older woman.
"My uncle, Aristocra Formbi, holds you humans in high esteem," Feesa answered tonelessly. "I was adhering to my family's policies when I signed up. Chiss going into the heart of Vagaari territory unprepared would be akin to you humans venturing all the way to Lwhekk, suicidal."
"There's no telling what we'll find," Jaina murmured. "Jagged…Assistant Syndic Fel, and I haven't seen a Vagaari raider for several years now."
"All the more reason to worry about a military buildup. Each time the Ascendancy has laid to waste their military facilities, the Vagaari have always recovered within the decade. It's been seven years since they attacked Csilla, more than enough time to replace the materiel and personnel they lost in the fighting. Don't get me wrong, I have nothing but respect for Assistant Syndic Fel and yourself, you've proven yourselves several times over to be more Chiss than some of the people I've worked with, but you aren't flawless."
Jaina raised a single eyebrow. "Even if this might reveal that the Killiks are more dangerous than we thought?"
"You'd have to ask Reya for an analysis of those bugs," Feesa shrugged. "I'm just the Vagaari expert. You know as well as I do that we Chiss rarely stray from our assigned lot in life."
"But you have your own opinion as well, don't you?"
This time it was Feesa's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Ambassador Solo, I know you tend to associate with some of the less…traditional members of our race, so I'll let it go this time. But unlike the Nuruodo, we of the

Chaf family do not allow personal feelings or opinions to cloud our decision making. I am on this mission not because of what I may or may not believe, but because I am fulfilling a duty to my family, to the Ascendancy. It would be unprofessional of me, un-Chiss, if I were to go into this mission with a preconceived notion. What we find at Vagar Praxut will be whatever we will find. I will not make monsters out of shadows, Killiks out of corpses."
"You can't go your *entire* life ignoring your opinions, your instincts," Jaina said mildly. "That was the sort of thinking that almost doomed the CEDF during the Yuuzhan Vong War, Chiss adherence to duty, to the chain of command."
"At the same time, our culture, our adherence to discipline and respect of the chain of command, is what has enabled the Ascendancy to survive on our own for over three millennia," Feesa countered. "The Ascendancy has survived both Sith and Jedi collapses, has survived multiple incarnations of your Republic, survived the Empire as short lived as it was. We follow our traditions, our military ethos, for a reason. It is when people start making rash decisions based off of emotion, off of opinion and not logic that problems occur."
"Like I said, making a decision without using your emotions is nearly impossible. We're all living beings, not droids blindly following orders. The Chiss survived for so long, yes. But I've read your history. None of the Ruling Families today were Ruling Families three centuries ago. Even your family, Chaf, was divested of its Ruling Family status after the Killik incident and only recently regained its former ranking. Why do the number of Ruling Families continue to change, why do families continue to rise and fall, if your logical decision making works so well?"
"The families fell because they ignored the thousands of years of tradition. My family fell because we looked to outsiders to do our menial tasks rather than spend time to do it ourselves. It will not be a mistake that will happen again. But if this doesn't work out, it may be a lesson the Nuruodo family will soon learn."
"What does that mean?"
"Have you ever realize why Aristocra Sev'eree'nuruodo, one of the most xenophobic of the Aristocras, allowed the Syndic to appoint a human Assistant Syndic? Why Assistant Syndic Fel's father was able to rise so high in the Ascendancy given his obvious humanity?"
"I always assumed he was able to accomplish much, and that Chiss appreciated merit over bloodlines."
"That is only a part of the truth. After the Empire of the Hand collapsed, the Nuruodo family was in a state of decline. They had chosen to side with Syndic Mitth'raw'nuruodo and your Empire, and

were paying the price for their lack of vision. By embracing the offensive methods of Syndic Mitth'raw'nuruodo, by ignoring the Non-Aggression Law, Nuruodo abandoned the core values of what it meant to be Chiss. Tossed aside Chiss superiority in favor of mingling with the lesser races. When Assistant Syndic Fel's father came along, my own family was on the rise and the Nuruodo were one bad step from losing their Ruling Family status."
"And then the Killik incident happened," Jaina remarked.
"Yes. I am not saying my family was any better than the Nuruodo, merely saying that the Nuruodo are not exactly the shining examples of Chiss society that you might think. When the Killik incident happened, the former Assistant Syndic of the CEDF was great friends with my father and members of the Chaf family. He was not so willing to intervene militarily, to destabilize the centuries of peace we had. Very few Chiss would, since as you say, the Ruling Families had remained unchanged for several centuries prior. Whereas Soontir Fel was an unknown factor, who simply saw our people as a stepping stone, a place to once again rise to prominence. Aristocra Sev'eree'nuruodo does not suffer fools lightly and replaced the Assistant Syndic with Baron Soontir Fel, someone she knew was vulnerable and needed a place to stay. Fel was not shy in employing his Empire-trained abilities to launch all out attacks using Nuruodo's CEDF fleets on any family that did not fall in line. He personally led the assault on my homeworld, purging it of Killiks and exiling any Joiners caught up in the fight. As a reward, much of our family's assets became his. As are the assets of the other families he helped to bring down in the name of the Ascendancy. In doing so, he not only secured a safe place for his family, but ensured that the Nuruodo family would remain a Ruling Family for the near future."
"But…you're not angry about it?" Jaina said puzzled over the lack of emotion she was feeling from the other Chiss.
"No, our family needed to be reminded of what it meant to be Chiss. Needed to be purged of Killik influence," Feesa shook her head. "The Nuruodo did us a favor in removing the rot that had set in. But by accepting the Fel family into their ranks, by allowing an alien to achieve the rank of Assistant Syndic, to control a vast majority of our military forces, they are hardly any better than we were. Both Soontir Fel and his son have done much to advance Nuruodo superiority over the other families using unorthodox techniques and political maneuvers, and not everyone is pleased with that. After all, they were responsible, fully or in part, for bringing down the five Ruling Families that had been infested with the Killiks. If they could do that with the

fleet of a lone family, who's to stop them if they decide to act 'for the good of the Ascendancy' once more? And yet, since the Nuruodo control the primary fleets of the Ascendancy, there isn't much anyone *can* do. This is the Chiss Ascendancy, not some Nuruodo-Fel Empire, but it is starting to look more like that as the days go on. I am sure the others not of the Nuruodo-allied families on this mission feel the same way."
"Jagged wouldn't let it come to that," Jaina shook her head. "He respects your traditions and culture as much as the next person. He has no desire to become some sort of emperor, nor will he allow Veeren to act against Ascendancy law. His duty is to the Ascendancy first, the Nuruodo family second."
"His duty is to *you* first," Feesa remarked deadpan. "Though the two of you have been circumspect with your relationship, it is fairly obvious who he would choose if it came down to it. And therein lies part of the problem with this mission. Everyone in this ship, in those fighters outside, volunteered, but only because of their ulterior motives."
"Ulterior motives? Please, explain," Jaina said, hastily trying to direct the conversation away from her and Jagged's relationship.
"House Sabosen, for example, stands the most to lose should a war with anyone break out. Funds that might otherwise go to social issues would be diverted to make ships, weapons, vehicles of war. If, during the course of an all-out war, House Sabosen proves incapable of sustaining everyday Ascendancy life for our civilians, they will lose their Ruling Family status and another will take their place. As such, they will be forced to make up the deficit with credits from their own coffers, will be forced to increase taxes and cut popular programs. It is in their best interest to see that this expedition turns up nothing of note, regardless of whether or not it will be good for the Ascendancy."
"But Baltke is a medic, how will…"
"He will also be vital in confirming the presence of Killik genetic material and providing medical scans of any Vagaari we capture. He can just as easily say that a sample was too corrupted, or make his own modifications to avoid a costly war with a nomadic group of bugs."
Jaina wet her lips, regarding Feesa with an even stare. "So that's one of our party, how about the others?"
"Inrokini, being in charge of the industrial sector, stands the most to gain should an unconventional war break out. It will be their factories that churn out our vehicles, their scientists who study the Killik samples and formulate new means to combat them, their communication beacons that will be used to keep in touch with the fleet as they scour the Unknown Regions for the Killiks. A war with the

Killiks will put them on par with the Nuruodo in terms of status and importance in the Ascendancy."
"Okay, what about the Csapla family? Aren't they considered the most important due to the fact they control resource appropriation?"
"Csapla is in the same ship as the Sabosen should any war break out. War time will see that military needs trump colonial and civilian needs. Even if they do have control over the resources, public pressure will force them to back Nuruodo for the sheer sake of preserving the Ascendancy. Any gains Nuruodo makes will be at the expense of Csapla influence and power."
"And your family? You said you were only coming along because it was in the best interest of your family."
"Simple enough, my uncle has great faith in you Jedi and the Assistant Syndic," Feesa answered with a small frown of disapproval. "He has a strangely vested interest in your success, you and the Assistant Syndic. The stronger the influence the two of you are in the Nuruodo family, the less power Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo and the Syndic has in turn. The less power *they* have, the more my own family recovers. I need not tell you why the Aristocra sent the two of you out here, do I?"
"No, we were kind of warned about that in advance," Jaina shook her head. "Thank you for being candid with me, Feesa. I'm actually surprised you were willing to lay all your cards on the table like that."
"No need to thank me ambassador, I was acting under orders from my uncle," Feesa replied without a hint of warmth as she returned to her feet. "He wanted you to be fully aware of the agendas of those on your crew so you and the Assistant Syndic can plan your moves accordingly. As I said, your success benefits the Chaf family. Your failures, while they won't hurt the Chaf family, will be an inconvenience we'd rather not have."
}-(VI)-{ }-(VI)-{
"One of the things to look for is a modified corpus callosum, caused by an influx of Killik pheromones," Mission science and intelligence officer, Daer'ey'ath, gestured to a holo-readout of several different species. "Other physical changes involve the dilation of the pupils until the entire iris appears black, and a change in the body's natural bio-rhythms. It does not matter what species it is, sentient or otherwise, all brains are affected in a similar manner, all eyes appear the same for the first few years as a Joiner. The changes allow the nest the victim has been joined to to take direct control over the victim's will and thoughts, their brains becoming little more than transceivers, their bodies an extension of the hive's will. Studies of Chiss Joiners reveal that within a couple of years, the personality of a majority of the

victims will be completely absorbed by the Killik nest and the victim's knowledge will be known by the nest he or she was absorbed in. There are some rare cases recorded where an individual is able to maintain some semblance of their personality even after being joined for several years. These individuals eventually regain their regular eye-color and become near-indistinguishable from non-joined individuals in mannerisms and actions. These prolonged Joiners are said to be the greatest threat and were the reason why the other Ruling Families eventually came down hard on the five afflicted families. A prolonged Joiner will not even be aware that his or her decision making processes have been altered to make decisions for the good of the colony, and will ignore his or her own people's well-being in favor of the Killiks. Normally the Joiners who reach this stage are people who were important in society at one point in time; armed forces commanders, governors, intelligence agents, individuals with unique abilities or in positions to affect policy. Most stay on with the chosen Killik hive, entering into positions similar to an overseer or nest-guardian. If beneficial to the nest, others will be sent back to their worlds of origin in an attempt to convince others to Join to increase the size of the hive. Though the individual personality and knowledge of a victim disappears upon joining, the nest in question becomes directly affected by that individual's wants and desires. In a perverted way, the nest attempts to fulfill the desires of its new member to keep that part of their consciousness happy.

In the records we have, the smaller nests that were recorded to have Vagaari Joiners were seen amassing wealth for the sake of wealth and raiding other Killik nests for larvae. These Vagaari Joiners obviously changed the thought processes of these nests and induced them into violence."

"So you believe Assistant Syndic Fel and Jedi Ambassador Solo?" The team's medic, Baltke asked aloud. "That the attacks on our colonies were due to Killiks and not some Imperial plot?"

"Sometimes the simplest explanation is the answer," Reya answered smoothly. "The Imperials, though capable of manufacturing evidence, would not go so far as to attack their own worlds. Furthermore, they could have easily framed the Galactic Alliance or some other more believable threat than the pacifistic Killiks." She turned to another member of their team. "Lieutenant Vero'tog'leo, as our colonies fall under your family's purview, what is your family's conclusion? Imperials or Killiks?"

"It could be either," Rotog said almost apathetically. "I'd like to think our Colonial Phalanx more than capable of handling a threat as minor

as the Killiks, but if the Killiks are involved, and they've absorbed the viciousness of the Vagaari, then anything is possible. Alternatively, the Imperials are already capable of launching a commando strike against our outlying regions, knowing full well we'd be unable to reinforce multiple locations in time. Since the Yuuzhan Vong War, the outer colonies have been receiving less and less support as funds go into building up Ascendancy fleets. This has meant that the rationing of supplies and utilization of ships long-past their retirement date have become common practices among our outer vanguards. In their current state, the colonial governors are ill-equipped to handle a deliberate strike by either party. They'll become even less equipped to handle future threats should a war break out, however, as the CEDF and CDF will instantly be appropriated any military tech and supplies. The Imperial threat is clear, we don't need to waste time chasing down ghost bugs and starting a second warfront."

"In any case, you all have the information on what to look for when we reach Vagar Praxut. I now leave it to Major Chaf'ees'aklaio to fill in any gaps we may have regarding the Vagaari."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Feesa flicked a button, and the holo-image of a Vagaari appeared. "Most of you have fought the Vagaari before and are familiar with their combat abilities, culture, and technology, so I won't go into that here. This close to Vagar Praxut, we should have encountered at least one Vagaari saucer, or one interdiction mine. The very fact that we have yet to see any trace of the Vagaari does not bode well for either us or them. I cannot say for certain what we should expect when we re-emerge into real-space, only that everything we know about the Vagaari may have to temporarily be set aside. It is unlike the Vagaari to just give up. They are too savage in nature, too unreasonable, for such an action. Their Empire is controlled by the triumvirate of the *Miskara*, Supreme Commander, and Grand Overseer. A council of elders advises them, but even their wisest have proven time and time again that they have little respect for anyone not of their race. If the astronavigation data compiled by the Nuruodo family is accurate, however, any Killik hive passing through their space would not have been able to do so peacefully. Simply put, we are heading into the unknown, even though Vagaari territory is well-charted and much is known about them. I'll have to reassess the situation once we land, but it will behoove us to proceed with full caution regardless. Assistant Syndic Fel, I cede the floor to you."

There was a small silence as Jagged studied the faces of each of the members of his team. Finally, he took to his feet, his face as expressionless as the Chiss in the room.

"In a little under an hour, we will emerge from hyperspace in the Vagar Praxut system. Rather than dance around the topic, I will say this outright. What we are doing is for the good of the Ascendancy as a whole, will benefit *all* families, ruling or otherwise. I wish to find the truth and report the truth, regardless of whether it bodes ill for me or not. I am well aware that everyone here in this room does not believe the same as I do, that recent events in the Ascendancy has created an 'every-family-for-themselves' atmosphere. We are already in enough danger out here and we should not have to worry about each other on top of everything.

This is your one and only warning. You will play those political games only when you have left my command, not during it. Should you even attempt to manipulate the mission away from its goals, you will be confined to quarters until we return to Csilla. All of you should have the good of the Ascendancy in mind, *especially* in these troubled times. If you think it is Chiss to ignore the common good in favor of power-plays and political schemes, then it is clear that the Chiss have become more like the Imperial Remnant than they would care to admit. We started this mission as a joint venture between all Ruling Families, a rare sign of unity among the Ascendancy. We *will* finish this mission in the same vein. Do I make myself clear?"

The Chiss in the room immediately snapped to attention, saluting sharply. "Sir, yes sir!"

Jagged held each of their red gazes unflinchingly. "Very well. Make the final preparations to land on Vagar Praxut. We will be the first Ascendancy team going there who does not intend to make it a smoldering crater, so it is likely any Vagaari will attack, but in self-defense. This is a fact-finding mission, we will be the guests of any Vagaari we do find, so do your utmost care to address any Vagaari we come across with respect. The sooner we find out what we need, the quicker we can leave and return to Csilla. That is all, dismissed."

With the room cleared of everyone save himself and Jaina, Jagged allowed some of the tension to leave his shoulders. "Was that enough?"

"It's given them something to think about," Jaina confirmed, standing. "What's wrong?"

"The political games that doomed the New Republic, are dooming the Galactic Alliance, are also destroying the Ascendancy. Even if we discover without a doubt that the Killiks were responsible, we may be too late."

Jaina took both his hands into her own. "Somehow, though, you'll find a way to succeed. You're Assistant Syndic Jagged Fel, heir to the Fel

tradition of wiggling out of the tightest of binds and landing on your feet."
"I think you are mixing up your family tradition with my own," Jagged replied with a raised eyebrow.
"Nah, I'm pretty sure I have it right," Jaina smirked. "It's why we get along so well. You're the confused one. It's *my* job to worry about the future, *your* job to get us through the present. We're forty, no thirty-eight, minutes away from setting foot on a completely hostile world with a single squad of soldiers, now's a good as time as any to make sure we start this off on the right side of things."
"Well then, let us hope that the Force is with us. We're definitely going to need it."
}-(Scene 2 End)-{
A\N: And the next chapter, in two weeks, continues Jaina's adventure into Vagaari space. I thought I'd explore (and make up things about) the Vagaari since they are only hinted at in canon. Fun times ahead. With this, we're two-thirds done with Act One, and the plot and action starts revving up.
And now for the Deleted Scenes...
Deleted Scenes:
So, here's a second set of three deleted scenes. The first revolves around an alternate take of Zekk and friends investigating the AlGrays on Relephon. I decided for a slightly less dramatic and fun-filled version of events, but eventually settled on what was in the story to keep with the mood I wanted.
"Checking in, no suspicious activity so far," Zekk whispered into the comlink.
"Roger, stay on station. The Queen Mother's people are certain that House AlGray is hosting several Corellian officers on that moon."
"I copy Control, Cradle Robber out." A snigger from his side caused Zekk to glare at his co-conspirator. "You're the ones who gave me that code name."
"We know," Trista said good-naturedly over the comlink. She was part of the three man surveillance team that was made up of herself, Taryn, and Zekk. She provided sniper-support while Taryn and Zekk did the snooping. *"We couldn't let your Jedi ego get all swollen. Taryn and I don't just let anyone join our team, you know."*
"I know," Zekk said glowering at the only twin he could glower at. "But 'Cradle Robber,' really? Half of the Royal Guard looked ready to kill me when they heard it. You Hapans are really protective of each other."
"The Queen Mother approved of it," Taryn said, as if that was the end of any debate.

Zekk rolled his eyes and brought up his electrobinoculars again. Sitting in a speeder across from a luxurious estate on one of the moons of Relephon was not how he envisions his duties as Jedi Ambassador to Hapes. Tenel Ka, however, had assured him that both she and Allana were sufficiently protected back at the palace. What was needed more was an explanation as to how the Corellians managed to get so far into Hapan territory. Five thousand Hapans had died in the skirmish, and the Corellians responsible were nowhere to be found. Before Tenel Ka made any overt moves towards Corellia, she needed to know if her own territory was still secure.
"Heads up," Trista whispered heatedly. *"A guard unit was just dispatched from the southern guard house. I think the two of you have been made."*
"How many?" Taryn asked.
"Enough, get out of there."
"We haven't completed our mission yet," Taryn shook her head. "Besides Tris, remember our handy all-purpose Jedi?"
"Fine," Trista seemed to hiss in annoyance. *"But if things start blowing up, I'm blaming you."*
Zekk could see the lights go on in front of a distant part of the fence surrounding the estate. A gate rolled open, and six guards stepped out. It was fortunate that the estate was in a heavily populated part of the city, and that idling speeders were a common sight.
"You're going to use your Mind Trick and tell them to go away, right?" Taryn whispered.
As the guards grew closer, with the Force enhancing his sight, Zekk could make out their faces. He clenched his jaw and slowly shook his head. "Three are Yinchorri, two are Falleen. They're resistant to that particular ability."
"Then get out of there," Trista sounded anxious. *"A second guard post was just activated."*
Taryn licked her lips as she gazed at the distant mansion. "No, we're not done."
"Our all-purpose Jedi can't do his hand-wavy thing and make the problem magically disappear. You don't <u>have</u> any other options left."
"Hand –waving isn't the only thing he's good for," Taryn said. The guards were closing quickly.
"Then what..." Trista trailed off as if struck by an epiphany. *"Really, Taryn?"*
"Let's see if it actually works. Let me know when we're clear."
"What works?" Zekk raised an eyebrow.

Taryn shrugged off the black leather coat she had been wearing in answer and freed her hair so that it hung at shoulder length. She ran her fingers through it several times to make it less orderly, and in one quick move, Taryn had shifted so that she was straddled on top of him. "This."
Zekk blinked, completely stunned as his hands reflexively rested on her hips. "Taryn."
She pressed her lips up against Zekk's, cutting off any further comment, before wrapping her arms around him and pulling the two of them close. Zekk's mind promptly froze. Out of the corner of his eyes, however, he could see that the guards were getting ever closer and knew that something had to be done. Wrapping his own arms around her, he returned the kiss with just as much passion as the red-haired warrior was giving. All for the sake of Taryn's crazy plan of course. He saw Taryn's gray eyes fly open in shock, before her the corners of her eyes crinkled in a small smile, and she enthusiastically resumed the kiss.
A very heavy, resigned sigh came over their comlink.
In the meantime, the guards finally reached the street the unknown speeder was on. Some were cautiously reaching for their blasters, while the others hung back with their hands on their own comlinks, ready to summon help if needed. As they illuminated the speeder with their own lights, they all stared dumbly at the couple making out in the front seat. The couple didn't even seem to notice them or the sudden brightening of their situation. And from the passionate way the two were kissing, it appeared as if they were in their own little world.
"False alarm," one of the guards reported with a disgusted sound. "Just two humans undergoing some courtship ritual. Probably fantasizing that they owned the estate. Wouldn't be the first."
"They didn't even look up once," another guard said with a shake of his head.
"AlGray doesn't pay me enough to watch aliens going at it," one of the Falleen guards added.
"And here I thought this would be something exciting. Can't believe I had to miss the last quarter of the game for this."
The security guards continued to mutter their displeasure as they walked away. Even when the light in front of the fence flashed out and all was quiet again, neither Zekk nor Taryn seemed to notice.
"*Trista to Taryn…Trista to Zekk…they're gone. They've returned back to their posts. Hey, the plan worked, you can stop now. Jedi Zekk! Sister! It's all clear!"*

"So?" Taryn muttered between kisses, promptly leaning in for another as enjoyed the feeling of Zekk's hands roaming her back.
"Taryn!"
"What!?" Taryn muttered grumpily, rolling off Zekk and back into her seat in the speeder. "Do you want to make out with him when the mission's over?"
Then, as if just realizing she had spent the past ten minutes heavily kissing, and pressed up against, her childhood crush, turned crimson and hastily reached for the abandoned pair of electrobinoculars. Not looking at Zekk, Taryn refocused the device back towards the estate, a very shy smile on her face.
Zekk, for his part, was still completely stunned as he just slumped back into the leather material of his seat. Sure he had definitely noticed that Taryn and Trista weren't the little girls he had first met, had even admitted to himself that they had become very beautiful and attractive young women.
He closed his eyes, Jedi calming exercises failing him as the past ten minutes vividly played back in his mind. His entire front side was still very warm from where Taryn had been pressed against him, and he could still recall the feel of her athletic form in his arms. To say that the emotions he was feeling were confusing would be an understatement. Before the kiss, he had always thought of the both of them as the little sisters he had never had. But now…
"Trista to Cradle Robber, come in, Cradle Robber," Trista's voice in his ear was clinically dry. There was no missing the extra emphasis Trista put on his code name.
"Cradle Robber here," Zekk sighed.
"I'm seeing a convoy of vehicles being prepped in the estate's garage."
I* Deleted Scene I end *I
As shown, the take and certain versions of events was very different than what ended up in the story. Of all the characters, I think Zekk/Taryn/Trista have the most deleted scenes simply because they were so fun to write about. At the same time, I was trying to keep the overall mood of the story to be somber and foreboding, so many of their scenes didn't fit in. And yes, the 'Cradle Robber' designation was due to JediMasterDraco's review back in aDA.
The next deleted scene is an alternative version of where I had the Skywalkers end up after the war. Written before the interlude story, I had a very different picture of what had occurred in mind. In essence, they ***really*** *retired from public life and were enjoying simpler times in a system far far away from the Galactic Core...*
I* Deleted Scene II begins *I

"Jesmin, Janek, Ben, dinner!" Mara called out.
"We'll be there soon!" Ben's voice echoed back over the Tatooine desert.
Kell Tainer chuckled softly as he reclined in his chair. "Thanks again for doing this, you two. When Jesmin started levitating things every time she got upset, I figured it was time to get her a proper teacher."
"Not a problem at all," Luke said, smiling a youthful grin as he sensed his two sons and Kell's daughter grow near. "I've kind of missed teaching, and Janek could definitely use a friend his age."
"Living in the middle of nowhere does have its downsides," Kell smiled, glancing about the sandstone walls of the Skywalker home. It was a modest-sized structure, a moisture farm that both Mara and Luke had purchased after retiring from politicking and running the Jedi Order. "Are we still good for the podraces this weekend? Jesmin can't stop talking about it."
"As far as I know," Luke said, his posture completely relaxed as he sipped a cup of milk. "Now are you going to tell us why Wraith Squadron is really out here?"
"Should have figured I couldn't sneak anything by two Jedi Masters," Kell said with a wry shake of his head. "Are you sure you want to hear? I thought you were a settled family man now, Master Skywalker."
"He is," Mara rolled her eyes. "But tell him anyways."
"Okay," Kell shrugged. "We're trying to get to the source of a galaxy-wide crime-wave. There's been a lot of evidence that the Hutts are involved, but we think the evidence is a bit too convincing. The Hutts, meanwhile, are doing what anyone falsely accused of serious crimes would do, bluster and threaten."
"So you come to Tatooine on a dangerous with your daughter?" Mara said with a raised eyebrow.
"Hey, that's why I'm stopping off here first. I figured she could learn a bit about being a Jedi, while her dad does the outrageously dangerous stuff no kid should have to face. I'm being as responsible a parent as can be."
"In other words, you just wanted a free babysitter," Mara deadpanned.
Kell smiled and tipped his own cup towards her in salute as they watched their children approach the homestead.
Ten-year old Ben Skywalker was leading a pair of seven-year olds through the shifting sands. Behind them were several other forms.
"Oh, they made some friends," Kell straightened, seeing several bantha loaded with shrouded figures follow the children back.
"Local Sand People tribe," Luke said. "Mara and I helped them clear out a Greater Krayt who had been encroaching on their territory. In

exchange, we were allowed to farm here without the raids that most others have to deal with."
"Ah," Kell blinked. "You know, I should be surprised that nothing you Jedi do surprise me anymore."
"Hi mom!" Ben said brightly, unwrapping the strips of cloth that protected his face from the suns and sand. "What's for dinner?"
"Wash up first," Mara jerked a thumb back towards the inside of the house. "Are we having guests?"
"Uh huh," seven-year old Janek Skywalker, named after one of his father's childhood friends, nodded. He gestured at the bantha. "They're hungry."
"Really hungry," Jesmin added, seemingly evaporating into her dad's arms. "I am too."
The lead Sand Person dismounted.
"Vexa," Luke smiled politely. "What brings you to our small plot of the desert?"
"Your sons," Vexa gestured to Ben specifically.
Luke's eyebrows rose. "Oh?"
"He convinced me that the Sand People might be able to better understand and 'get along' with the other farmers if we learned a little more about them. If the farmers learn which of their actions offends us, we can avoid any future conflict. He is very much a Jedi."
Mara grinned as she mussed her son's head. "Is he now?"
"It's fortunate most of the farmers in this area are refugees from the war," Luke said. "They don't have as many preconceptions about Sand People as many of the locals."
I* Deleted Scene II ends *I
Ultimately, I decided not to railroad the Skywalkers to that extent, I mean, I needed them back in the main story eventually and this would have made it a little hard to do. Besides, I highly doubt Luke would just give up all *of his responsibilities to the order, regardless of how nice it would be to raise his family in peace. So, I moved him to Ossus, made him a teacher, and he's soon going to go all GrandMastery again.*
The last deleted scene is an Anakin/Tahiri scene. Originally I wasn't going to have them end up on Ossus right away but have a mini-adventure of their own. This would have led to Anakin learning about the Colony and their plots without seemingly coming up with them out of thin air. Unfortunately, it would have drawn the story out a bit too much. As I told the kind reviewers who pointed out that he seemed like a know-it-all in Jacen's chapter, I'm only one author. I could have spent a bunch of chapters on the mini-adventure, making it into its own book if you will, but I'd rather focus on the overall storyline. It was easier to

just have him look at the information gathered than to give him an extended adventure that detracted from what was happening elsewhere. So, without further delay, the start of the mini-adventure that never happened...

I* Deleted Scene III begins *I

It was kind of clear things wouldn't be easy straight from the get-go. Not only did the crew of the *Veila* have to deal with a complex political situation involving peoples with great cultural pride, but they also had to do so in a galaxy that was much more different than the one they had left. Reviewing various HoloNet reports and transmissions, the news coming in only seemed to grow more and more dim regardless of what section of the galaxy they were looking at. So it was really no surprise when the *Veila* was suddenly dragged out of hyperspace a few hours out from her destination.

"Tahiri?" Anakin said briskly, sliding into the co-pilot's seat. His wife was in the pilot's chair beneath the cognition hood that allowed her direct control of the *Veila*.

"Interdiction mine of some sort," Tahiri said grimly. "Powerful one too."

"It's military grade, I can't jump to hyperspace," The *Veila* sounded panicky.

"Easy," Anakin patted the control nodule in front of him. "Keep up long-range scans. I doubt someone just placed a mine here and forgot about it."

"Can I please shoot the mine to pieces? I really don't like it."

"Give us a moment," Anakin directed. "Where did we come out?"

"Jospro sector, Jomark system."

Anakin and Tahiri both reached out through the Force. When they confirmed their suspicions, and sensed the intentions of an approaching group of ships, they began to coordinate their movements.

"Void defenses up, *Veila.*" Tahiri ordered, angling the ship slightly. "Charge plasma and laser weaponry. We're about to have some unwanted guests."

"So....we're going to stay here, next to the creepy mine, and wait for them? I can easily out run them all back to hyperspace."

"I know you can," Tahiri smiled. "But if we leave now, this group might ambush someone else who isn't fortunate enough to have a ship bristling with weapons. If we're lucky, these pirates are going to surrender the moment they realize who they've captured."

"That's being positive," Danni joined the duo in the cockpit. "Tekli's got the little ones secured. We're ready to go do your usual heroics."

And just like that, two squadrons of fighters and a light frigate dropped out of hyperspace directly ontop of them, using the mine to home in on their prey.
And just like that, half the fighters were vaporized by plasma and laser weaponry that had been fired even before the attacking force had emerged.
The rest of the pirates scattered in alarm, some of the fighters immediately leaping to hyperspace in blind panic. The remaining fighters and the lone frigate opened fire immediately, the ion weaponry being employed meant that they wanted to capture and not kill.
"They have <u>really</u> bad aim," The *Veila* commented, falling behind several of the attacking fighters and lighting them up with a barrage of laser fire.
"Missiles," Tahiri warned. "Lots of them. That frigate's really aggressive."
"*Voids have it*," the *Veila* replied smugly. "*These guys <u>really</u>, <u>really</u>, need to time their shots better if they even want to have a hope of scratching my hull."*
"You do know that these are probably untrained pirates who got lucky enough to get all these ships?" Anakin said conversationally. "I mean, most of the fighters are either TIE or Uglies. Even the frigate is nearly thirty years old."
"*Shush, this is the first real firefight I've had in seven years. Let me have my victories,"* the *Veila* said poutingly.
The hybrid ship changed target to the frigate, an older *Interceptor IV*-class frigate most common in pirate forces. The few fighters that remained were laughably ineffective against the *Veila*'s shields and void defenses, allowing the sentient frigate to concentrate on its slightly larger rival and not-so-sentient crew.
"Target weapons and engines," Anakin ordered, as Tahiri continued to pilot the ship. "Plasma rounds for the weapons, lasers for the engines, we don't want to accidently cook off their reactor."
"Affirmative," if the eight-year old *Veila* could salute, she would have.
Seconds later, her four, individually mounted yaret-kor belched out streams of molten energy at the fat target before them. The aging frigate's shields were no match for the latest in Yuuzhan Vong plasma weaponry, and the globs of molten material ate away at the pirate vessel's armaments. Almost simultaneously, the *Veila's* three quad-laser turrets focused their fire on the enemy ship's engines.
A single pass was all it took to leave the pirate flagship dead in space.
"Remaining fighters are retreating to hyperspace."

"Let them go, let's hope they learned their lesson," Tahiri said.
"Yup, let's focus on the frigate," Anakin pointed out the viewing port.
"Receiving incoming message…addressed to the 'Vong ship.'" The *Veila* sounded extremely disgruntled at that. *"Is he blind? Can't he see that I'm a result of precision shaping and engineering?"*
"You tell him," Danni, one of the *Veila's* creators, agreed with a mock huff.
"Danni, please, don't encourage her," Anakin said with a sigh. "Go ahead *Veila,* put the transmission through."
"This is independent corsair frigate Windfall to unidentified Vong ship. We surrender! We surrender!"
"*Windfall* this is the Jedi Order vessel *Veila*. We accept your surrender, lower all shields and send your crew but yourself to the escape pods. Prepare to be boarded," Anakin replied.
"Jedi? But in a Vong…sweet merciful Force, did we attack <u>the</u> Anakin Solo and his Vong-Jedi girlfriend?"
Danni and Tahiri just hung their heads, shaking it in amusement. Anakin felt their pity towards the pirate and fought back a chuckle of their own. "Yes, you attacked the ship carrying Anakin Solo and his *wife*."
"Prepare to face our wrath," the *Veila* added for good measure.
"No! We surrender! We're sorry! We're sorry! We didn't know! I'm getting my crew to their escape pods, don't fire!"
"*Veila*," Danni said pointedly.
"He insulted Tahiri…and me…by calling us Vong."
"What do you do with an eight-year old sentient ship with enough firepower to take on a capital ship?" Anakin asked, exchanging amused looks with the two women in the cockpit.
"This," Tahiri looked up at the ceiling. "*Veila*, I appreciate you trying to defend me, but that was mean. Apologize to the frightened pirate captain, and you're forbidden from sending unapproved comm or villip messages for the rest of the week."
"Okay…" the *Veila* said mournfully.
"Never thought I'd see someone actually lecture a ship," Danni mumbled, shaking her head. "You two want me to take the cockpit while you board the cruiser?"
"Sure," Tahiri slid out from beneath her cognition hood. "They've launched all escape pods."
"Yet I'm still sensing several dozen lifeforms aboard," Anakin blinked. "Maybe they ran out of room in the escape pods?"
Tahiri, who was likewise focusing on the ship, shook her head. "No, these ones are scared, in pain. My guess is that they're slaves."

"In the meantime, send out an alert to the nearest Galactic Alliance Security force," Anakin directed Danni. "Those fighters that escaped probably have a base nearby. If there are slaves on the frigate, there'll probably be slaves there too."
"Roger," Danni gave a half salute as the cognition hood lowered over her head.
The *Veila* came up alongside the *Windfall,* and the two ships docked. Waiting for Anakin and Tahiri directly on the opposite side of the airlock was a lone Bith dressed in a surplus captain's uniform.
"Captain Wintaga Wintoga," the Bith saluted. "It's an honor to meet you in person, Anakin Solo and wife!"
Tahiri and Anakin blinked incredulously. "A Bith pirate?"
"What? We can't all be musicians and performers," Wintaga said dourly. "Stupid Firgin D'an. All anyone has to do is say 'Bith' and they instantly think of him."
Anakin scratched the back of his head. "Okay…then, Wintaga. Why exactly did you attack me, and how did you come into position of that mine and these ships?"
"Oh those? They're provided by the Colony," Wintaga perked up. "As long as we give them a percentage of our profits, they give us the most swinging new tech they can get their hands on."
"The Colony?"
"Uh huh," the Bith nodded. "They're the new thing in this galaxy. Taking money from the rich to give to the poor. Half the refugee camps in this sector benefit from their actions!"
"And do you know where the 'Colony' gets their tech and ships?"
The Bith shrugged. "Don't know, don't ask. As long as I get paid and am making a difference out here, I don't care either."
"And the others still aboard your ship?" Anakin continued his questioning.
"My dues," the Bith began to wring his hands. "I give them the crews of any vessels we capture as part of my payment. I don't see what the big deal is, the Colony guys let them go two weeks later without any ransom being paid. But hey, as long as I get the tech and credits, I'm not complaining. Lot of people in this galaxy who'd kill to have they type of job I have."
"You do know that piracy is still a crime, right?"
"I've been out here for nearly a year and a half now and you're the first Galactic Alliance or Jedi ship I've seen," Wintaga protested. "I mean, isn't your Praxeum like, right next door? Why are you wasting time on me, anyways? I'm just a small fry in this galaxy.

"Uh huh," Tahiri folded her arms in front of her chest, giving the Bith pirate a patented stare all mothers seem to develop.
"So…." The Bith shifted. In a less confident voice he tried, "So you can go about your business now, right? I'm not the big shot pirate you were looking for."
"Really?" Tahiri said skeptically.
"It's my first time being arrested," the Bith pouted. "Can't you let me go with a warning or something? I mean, I'll be spending forever picking up the rest of my crew in those escape pods, especially since you shot out our engines. And then I'll have to deal with their moping and whining about missing out on this score. Isn't that punishment enough?"
"I have a headache," Anakin groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose.
"What do you expect, he did attack us," Tahiri patted his arm sympathetically. "Look, Captain Wintoga, do you have any more prisoners back at your base?"
"Well yeah," the Bith blinked. "My ship can only carry so many people you know. But if you go to my base, you'll have to deal with my boss."
"Your boss?" Anakin said skeptically. Anyone crazy enough to have Wintaga Wintoga as a subordinate was definitely not exactly the most intimidating.
"Oh yes," Wintaga nodded eagerly. "My boss is a full-fledged Colony lieutenant! He'll grind you to a pulp and spit you back out."
"We'll see," Anakin said noncommittally. He felt additional Force signatures arrive in system and allowed himself to smile. "Never underestimate Jedi. Especially not a squadron full of them."
Tahiri pulled out her comlink and likewise beamed. "Hey Tesar! How are the Wild Knights these days?"
End of deleted scenes

Jaina
(-(-(I)-)-)
The sudden yank out of hyperspace was unexpected, even if the crew of the aging Chiss picketship the *Placeholder*, and her accompanying trio of fighters, had been expecting a reversion after a week of hyperspace travel. But a count-down from ten doesn't normally get cut short at eight.
"Vagaari interdictor mine!" Feesa called out with full professionalism as their ship was dragged out of hyperspace at the edge of the Vagar Praxut system. She flicked a couple of switches to kill the alarms and made several more adjustments to ease the strain on their hyperdrive.

"Any sign of Vagaari saucers?" Jagged asked tersely, entering the cockpit.
"Negative," Jaina, from her position in the pilot's chair, reported. "Scans showing only the mine and an automated beacon of some sort. It's transmitting a message, running it through the translator."
"*We fought as warriors. Died as warriors. Slaver became the enslaved. Go no further if you wish not a glorious death at the hands of foe invincible."*
"Well that's a good sign," Jaina muttered, rolling her eyes.
"Scanners picking up a sizable debris field stretching from the outer limits of the system towards the center," Feesa said. "There do not appear to be any active vessels."
"Assistant Syndic, my flight and I can scout ahead in case any lie in wait." The leader of the three-man squad, Commander Enton Adelmaa'j offered.
"Not necessary," Jagged negated. "We'll continue our approach. Sensors still aren't picking up any other ships in this region, but it doesn't hurt to be cautious. Stay with us unless ordered otherwise."
"*Understood. Blade Flight Lead, out."*
The four Chiss vessels coasted into the five-planet star system at a stead, yet careful pace. Every light-second covered bore signs of a tremendous battle, and an equally tremendous loss of life.
"That's a Vagaari super cruiser," Feesa gestured to the remains of a larger vessel. "They're only used to defend Vagaari territory, crew of nearly twenty-thousand. And see those remains over there? They look like five, maybe six *Surfeik*-class cruisers, each having about two-thousand people on board."
"The message did say they died as warriors," Jaina murmured, aghast at the literal sea of debris they were wading through.
"One moment, picking up something on the long-distance scanners," Feesa reported. "I…I don't know what to make of it. Sensors are showing a large number of fighters leaving Vagar Praxut on an outbound course on the other side of this system."
"Vagaari?"
"No," Feesa frowned. "X-wing and Clawcraft-class. IFF is similar to the signatures broadcast by the pirates plaguing the rest of the galaxy."
"There's no way pirates can be responsible for all this."
"Shall we pursue?" Feesa looked to Jagged.
"Have they detected us?"
"No sir. The sensors installed on this vessel specifically for this mission are the most advanced in the Ascendancy arsenal. Even our fighter-escort can't see these outbound vessels, so we should be safe."

"Then hold position. If there are more of them, we don't want to give ourselves away. Tell Blade Flight to hold position. Kill our engines too. No sense approaching if we don't know who else is out there. Jaina, can you sense anything with your Jedi abilities?"
"Give me a moment." Jaina submersed herself in the Force, reaching out through the graveyard of parts and bodies. She stretched out to the nearest planet, frowning as she did.
"What's wrong?"
"What's the name of the nearest planet?" Jaina gestured to the distant orb of the fourth planet from the sun.
"Vagar Rabat," Feesa said, briefly checking the charts. "It's a forested world, high in mineral and metal resources. All the planets and moons in this system are resource heavy. It has to be artificial, but the Ascendancy has never had a chance to study how the system was formed. In any event, the high-resource value of this system is what allows the Vagaari to recover from any losses with barely any delay."
"Well, there's nothing on that planet now," Jaina said grimly.
"Nothing?" Feesa and Jagged waited for her to elaborate.
"Nothing," Jaina repeated. "There's no life at all, not even trees. It's completely dead, just like this field of debris."
"What about the other planets?"
"We're too far away for me to get a good reading," Jaina said, shaking her head once. She closed her eyes anyway and reached out again. "The further we are, the less accurate a picture I can get."
"Scans show that the X-wings and Clawcraft have made the jump to hyperspace," Feesa reported. "We're the only ships in the region once more."
"Inform the rest of the crew that we will survey Vagar Rabat before venturing any further into this system. I want to know exactly what Jedi Ambassador Solo felt and why she's calling the planet a dead world."
"Understood," Feesa saluted and left the cockpit.
"Jaina?" Jagged asked in a softer voice.
The young woman, however, shook her head. "I'm not getting any insight into this. All I know is that there's something off about this system."
"Jedi intuition?"
"Definitely," Jaina said, her worry showing for the first time. "Something is definitely wrong, Jag. We'll have to be careful, but not for the reasons we thought. I can say one thing with certainty though."
"And that is?"
"There's Jedi in this system," Jaina said, her brown eyes glowing with strength. "At least two, maybe more. But like this system, there's

something strange about them. I shouldn't be able to feel the Force bond between them, but it's so strong that I can feel it all the way out here. No one person can be that strong. It like…like there's two Jedi, but millions of other Force-sensitives at the same time boosting their presence. I don't know what to make of it."
"The let us hope the planet we are about to land on contains answers. With mysterious fighter craft and strange Force-users, I do not like the way our odds continue to increase."
Jaina stared at the distant sphere that was Vagar Rabat. "Neither do I."
(-(-(II)-)-)
"The last survey of the planet took place nearly sixteen years ago," Feesa addressed the crew of the *Placeholder* in its hangar bay a day later. "At the time, it was recorded that Vagar Rabat had close to seven hundred-thousand people living on the planet, with almost three times that the number of enslaved peoples of varying species. However, our scans of the planet have revealed nothing living existing on the surface of the planet, and terrain drastically different than what we have recorded. I am no planetologist so I cannot guess how a lush, tropical world could be reduced to this state in such a short amount of time."
"The probes we sent down reveal a soil composition analogous to that found in Tatooine's desert," Jagged spoke, hands clasped at the small of his back. He activated a touch-screen, and images of the planet appeared in vivid color. "It makes sense given that scans show the planet bears a heavy resemblance to that desert world. All usable minerals have been leached from the ground, and more worrying, many of the mountains recorded in the previous survey have been completely destroyed."
"An orbital bombardment, sir?" One of the CEDF marines asked.
"Doubtful," Jagged shook his head. "The probes revealed no craters that would signify a bombardment."
Jaina flicked through the images. "Most of the evidence recorded by the probes seem to indicate strip-mining on a massive scale. The fact that the grounds are devoid of any valuable mineral seems to confirm that. The oceans recorded on the last survey also appeared to have been reduced to a tiny fraction of their size."
"They were most likely mined for deuterium," Rotog guessed. "Very few planets have bodies of water as vast as Vagar Rabat. I know the Colonial Phalanx makes finding such planets near the Ascendancy a priority. Though nuclear fission is an antiquated power source, some of our backup and start-up reactors in the colonies rely on it."
"Oceans, mountains, a whole planet mined to dust?" Baltke whistled. "And a people who can massacre the Vagaari home defense force? And

here we are with just a flight of fighters and an old picketship with advanced sensors."
"Sir," the voice of Commander Enton Adelmaa'j sounded over the intercom.
"Go ahead."
"*Sir, my flight did a fly-by over the planet as you instructed. We've picked up a very weak transmission coming from the southern pole of the planet. We had to make a second pass to even confirm its existence. The transmission is definitely Vagaari in origin, requesting food aid and medical supplies."*
"'Requesting', commander?" Feesa said incredulously.
"*Yes, ma'am. Though it was more like 'if you have any honor you'll give us aid before we battle you to the death.'"*
"That sounds more like it," Feesa muttered. She looked to the others in the room. "But even then, Vagaari *never* ask for help, especially from the Chiss. This is either a trap or the Vagaari are very desperate."
"It has been over four years since the last Vagaari sighting," Reya noted. "If the planet's been reduced to the state we've seen, it's doubtful that anyone living down there will have much to live off of."
"And they might be able to tell us what's happened," Jaina added.
Jagged exhaled slowly. "Very well. Lieutenant Vero'tog'leo, have half your marines standing by. You'll escort myself, Doctor Baltke, Colonel Chaf'ees'aklaio, and Jedi Ambassador Solo to the planet. The others will stay with Agent Daer'ey'ath. Agent Daer'ey'ath, you'll remain onboard and continue a holding pattern with Blade Flight. At the first sign of trouble, you are to command all ships to fall back outside of the system."
"Understood."
Jagged leaned back over to the comm-unit. "Commander, have you responded to the Vagaari transmission yet?"
"*Negative, sir. In any case, my flight and I believe it to be an automated message. It continues to repeat, and when we did a single pass over the point of origin, we saw nothing but ice and sand."*
"Most of the crew of this vessel will be going down to investigate. You and your flight are to remain in orbit with this ship. Agent Daer'ey'ath is in charge."
"*I copy. Be careful down there, sir."*
"Will do." Jagged nodded to the rest of the crew, and they quickly stood and filtered out of the room. "Assistant Syndic Fel, out."
(-(-(III)-)-)
The shuttle touched down a kilometer away from the origin of the distress beacon, settling on a semi-frozen tundra gleaming from the

rays of the distant sun. The five Chiss and two humans within the shuttle emerged, shielding their eyes as they adjusted to the glare of the sun.
"Jaina?" Jagged asked in a low voice.
Jaina nodded slowly. "There's definitely someone here. Two or three people, but they're very weak."
"I thought you said this was a dead planet?" Baltke muttered. A low rumble sounded in the distance, the sounds of rocks clashing on rocks. But the sound didn't last long.
"I also said the further away, the less accurate my senses get," Jaina retorted, not looking back at the man. She concentrated on the lives she was sensing. "The three I'm sensing now are barely alive. They're either near death or in stasis. Most likely the latter, since I'm not sensing any fear or distress."
"Lead the way," Jagged gestured. At the same time, he also motioned for the two CEDF marines, Fenlish and Tlarik, to take up defensive positions on either side of her.
Jaina's brown eyes swept the vanishing tundra as the Force guided her steps. Apparently, even the southern pole hadn't avoided the same strip-mining that had devastated the rest of the planet. The ground itself resembled a heavily-cratered moon landscape, much of the permafrost existing in tiny patches along the rims of each deep crater. It was hard to imagine anyone escaping the notice of whoever was responsible, as there literally did not appear to be a single stone left unturned.
Wild arctic winds whipped across the ground unabated by any natural barrier. Small spirals of melting arctic ice rose up and vaporized from the harsh friction. It was as if someone had combined Hoth and Tatooine and decided to unleash a windstorm at the same time. Occasional ground tremors also kept the team ill-at-ease, but the movements did not appear to be too serious or damaging.
Despite the hostile climate, the Chiss and human team was well-dressed and well-trained, and they pressed onwards. They saw nothing but frozen soil and withered plants. No land animals, insects, or birds of any type. They truly were walking through a dead land. The distant Vagaari sun struggled to cut through the thick, gray clouds in the air, leaving parts of the land shrouded in darkness.
Eventually, their trek through the ruined landscape took them to a deep crevice, a several kilometer drop separating the tops from the darkened bottom. Jaina pressed a hand to the frozen sandy surface at the top of the gash in the ground.
"They're somewhere under here. Probably a cave of some sort."

Peering into the crevice, the Chiss and humans exchanged wary expressions. So many things could go wrong, yet at the same time they could not afford to pass up the chance to learn what happened. The arctic wind continued to howl all around them, the biting cold and fast-setting sun urging action.
Repelling lines were hammered into place, and the CEDF marines were the first ones down. Jaina, Jagged, Baltke, and Feesa followed the trio of marines, the fissure just wide enough for them to squeeze through. They were fortunate that they did not have to descend too far.
After only a half-kilometer of climbing, pretty much the length of their ropes, they could see evidence of a bunker of some sort. A thin lip of rock stuck out, leading to a heavily sealed door of primitive-looking construction. The surface was smooth, and there did not appear to be any means of opening the heavy slab of rock.
"Jaina," Jag gestured again.
"Vagaari finder and door opener, what would you do without me, Jagged?" Jaina quipped, activating her lightsaber. She began the slow task of cutting through the door while the rest of the team hung onto their ropes and patiently waited for the path to clear. After several long minutes, Jaina had cleaved a person-sized hole into the thick rock. Wiping the beads of sweat from her forehead, Jaina deactivated her lightsaber and smirked at the Chiss and her boyfriend. "We're good to go."
The marines, by Jagged's order, entered first, and the others followed after receiving an 'all clear.' Glow-sticks were snapped on and thrown into the darkened chamber. It was a spacious room, but the shape of it made it appear hastily constructed. Its depth also ensured that it was suitably cold.
"This place looks like a command and control room," Rotog gestured to a bank of deactivated computers and star maps, his breath came out in a vaporous cloud.
"And there are our survivors," Jaina whispered, gesturing to one corner of the room. An array of four pods were lined up against the wall, but only three appeared to be on. Around them were almost a dozen emaciated and dead Vagaari, the last of who appeared to have self-inflicted terminal injuries.
"Guarding their commanders to their last," Feesa said in a subdued voice. She knelt by one of the corpses, her red eyes reflecting surprise for the fraction of a second. "Correction, guarding their leaders to the last. This one is the Supreme Commander."
"This place is a tomb," CEDF marine Fenlish whispered.

Jaina leaned over one pod, the surface frosted over. She cleared off the layer of frost and was about to look into it when the monitor above it began to flicker. Simultaneously, the ground began to shake, bits of ice and dirt falling from the ceiling. The group hastened to regain their footing, but as quickly as the quake began, it ended.
"The pod's losing power," Jaina reported. "There must be continuous quakes, damaged the power source somehow."
"Are we really going to wake up Vagaari?" Baltke grimaced, though he belied his harsh words by starting the de-thawing process on another pod. "Blasted savages. They can at least make their computer programs coherent."
"As much as I hate to admit it, the Vagaari are pioneers in suspended animation tech," Feesa moved to another pod. "It's more like we can't understand *their* reasoning than it being nonsensical."
Jaina and Jagged worked on one pod, while the others worked on the other two. It was only after the invisisteel shell of their pod cleared that Jaina and Jagged realize who they were seeing.
"It's a child!"
"Same over here," Baltke said, popping the hatch and pulling out a small Vagaari.
"And this is probably their father," Feesa gestured to the individual she was thawing out.
"Their mother is in this one, then," CEDF marine, Tlarik, motioned to the deactivated pod. "Looks like she didn't make it."
"A royal family?" Jaina guessed, using the Force to ascertain the status of the three survivors.
"Akin to it," Feesa opened the hatch to the pod she was tending to. She touched the icy cold, yet intricate robes the Vagaari inside was wearing and then removed the wooden mask that had been placed over his face. "If I'm reading his clothing and markings correctly, this is the Grand Overseer. No wonder the Supreme Commander and his men stood guard."
"I thought the two ranks were equal? The Supreme Commander is in charge of the military forces, and the Grand Overseer handles the domestic side of things?" Jaina blinked.
"That's true. The Grand Overseer is more of a governing position. As his name suggests, he oversees Vagaari territories and ensures the integration of any subjugated species," Feesa said. With the help of one of the marines, she began to haul the unconscious official out of his pod. "But the Grand Overseer is culturally superior to the Supreme Commander despite their equal ranks, and *always* stays in Vagaari space even when the *Miskara* and Supreme Commander leave it. Think

of him as a high priest, even if the Vagaari don't have any, that can bless the soldiers and give them good fortune for their raids."
Another groundquake shook the chamber, the rumble deeper and more ominous in timbre. This time one of the far walls caved in and a cascade of icy debris and dirt poured in in a thunderous racket.
"Get back to the surface!" Jagged yelled to his men, lifting up the unconscious Vagaari child in a protective hold.
Baltke swept up the second child, while the CEDF marines hauled the limp form of the adult Vagaari towards the exit of the structure. The groundquake continued, a larger boulder falling down and smashing one of the deactivated computers.
"I've got the shuttle on remote!" Rotog yelled out.
The auto-retracting function of the cables suspending them came in handy as the team was whisked up the side of the crevice in record time. The ground continued to crack and shake all the while, tossing the Chiss and humans back and forth in their ascent.
Then, just when it looked as if they were going to escape, part of the lip of the crevice gave way. One cable had been anchored to that portion of lip, and the CEDF marine, Corporal Fenlish, attached to said cable could only issue a strangled yell of surprise and terror before he plummeted out of sight amidst a hail of person-sized debris.
The others had little time to mourn his loss, however, as the rest of the lip began to break apart. Rapidly hauling themselves onto the surface of the tundra, they all barely escaped certain death as the crevice was widened on both sides. Only afterwards did the shaking stop.
Still gasping for air and grateful for their lives, the appearance of their shuttle was a welcomed sight. Tired and sad from their ordeal and loss of a comrade, yet hopeful all the same, the survivors helped shift the still unconscious Vagaari into the shuttle, and they left the dead world of Vagar Rabat behind.
(-(-(IV)-)-)
Covered in dust and frost, the crew had a brief, subdued meeting about what to do while the Vagaari lay in the medbay. It was quickly agreed upon to keep the Vagaari children sedated, while waking the Grand Overseer. Rotog wanted to have his marines present, but Jaina argued against it. Jagged agreed with her, and in the end, Jaina and Baltke were the only ones in the room. The others were looking on from an adjacent chamber, able to give input through earpieces.
"He should be waking up shortly," Baltke muttered, injecting a drug into the Vagaari. "Their stasis tech appeared to have been damaged, so there are some abnormalities in his blood-work and musculature. Granted, this *is* the first time I've worked on a live Vagaari before."

"Chaf'ees'aklaio," Jaina said professionally. She observed the unconscious Vagaari. The Grand Overseer was just a hair under one and half meters tall, his large hands and stubby fingers slightly bigger than his head. Like all Vagaari, he had two mouths, both with two sets of pointed teeth. His skin was a tan-purplish shade that would have looked unhealthy on most other species. He had been divested of the intricate robes he had been wearing and was now wearing a hospital smock. "Is there anything I should expect? Apart from him probably being the only survivor of his race."
"*Despite his post being bureaucratic in nature, he would be a formidable soldier. To become Grand Overseer, in Vagaari culture, he had to have personally subjugated and enslaved an entire planet of sentient beings. Vagaari are generally unorganized, so it is likely he did so with limited forces at his disposal,"* Feesa replied. *"I would imagine him being very intelligent. He will probably bluster a bit, but if you don't back down, he'll respect you*."
"No wonder why the Yuuzhan Vong liked them," Jaina snorted. "Okay. Let's see if he's willing to drop his warrior pride for a bit."
Baltke held up a datapad. "Going off this pad I found on him. He was in stasis for about five, six years. At least, that's the date of the last log he left. I won't be surprised if he's a bit disoriented. I've aged the two Vagaari, they're about fourteen, fifteen years of age despite their size. As you can tell by the Grand Overseer, the Vagaari aren't exactly the tallest of races."
The Grand Overseer began to stir, his two mouths opening and closing as his body slowly recovered. Indigo-shaded eyes flickered open and he weakly turned his head.
"Your children are still alive," Jaina said cautiously.
The Vagaari's eyes darted to her, focusing with some confusion. "Children?"
"We…we found two children in the pods next to yours. They're not yours?"
The Vagaari, in answer, just let his head recline on the pillow. "One is. The other is probably Duresh's child. The Supreme Commander was always fond of him and it would be just like him to give up his space."
Jaina nodded silently.
"You are human?"
"I am. I'm Jedi Knight Jaina Solo. You're onboard a Chiss vessel."
"I am Grand Overseer Intarsesh, supervisor of the Vagaari Empire and administrator of twelve systems."
"I am sorry for your loss."

"Do not be. Sympathies do nothing for the dead, only burden the living. I do not have to ask why I am here. You are no doubt wondering why the Vagaari have ceased their raids on your territory."
"We have a pretty good idea why now," Jaina answered gently. "We've kept the children sedated, do you wish to be brought to them?"
The bluish-purple eyes of the Vagaari leader darted to Jaina once more. The man appeared to be even more emaciated now that he was conscious, his cheek bones stretching tan skin to give the man a skeletal appearance. "Let them sleep. At least your drugs will keep them from dreaming of the horrors they've seen. There was…. one other pod…."
"She did not make it," Jaina shook her head apologetically. "Groundquakes had damaged the power supply."
Intarsesh nodded in silent understanding.
"Who was she, if you don't mind me asking?"
"She was Elanash, the *Miskara's* daughter, my mate," the Vagaari answered woodenly. "Her union to me was to unite our people and breathe new life into our Empire."
"What happened?" Jaina whispered reverently.
"The dark ones came, swept through our space like a plague. We fought. We died or became their slaves," the Vagaari answered, eyes closing in pain. "No matter how many of the enemy we killed, thousands more took the place of every one slain. No matter how many of their ships we destroyed, ten of our own for their every one were lost in turn. Our slaves became their slaves. Our soldiers and civilians puppets to their bidding. We fought for five galactic standard months, and we died for five months. In space, in atmosphere, on the ground, at sea, below the ground, we were found and slaughtered. You cannot stop them, the creatures from the deep darkness. It is impossible."
In her mind's eyes, Jaina could almost see the battles unfold. The increasing desperation as ship after ship was destroyed by a seemingly unstoppable tide. She could hear orders being yelled out, warriors chanting as they made their final stand; just before massive beetle-like creatures tore them to pieces. She saw armies fall as swarms of locus-like creatures sliced through them. She saw ships explode as shadowy figures made suicidal dives into them. An entire system engulfed in the flames of battle. There was no escape, no retreat, entire populations of Vagaari dying where they stood.
"Who attacked you?" whispered, her mouth dry.
The Vagaari opened his eyes and turned his head towards Jaina. "You say you are a Jedi Knight?"

"I am."
"It is your people who have led us to ruin."
"My people?"
"Yes, they led the horde. They knew our forces tactics before we even lined up in formation. The Jedi who called himself Prime Taat, TaatWelk, struck mercilessly. We asked for no surrender, and none was given. Our greatest warriors went toe-to-toe with his emissary, the one who calls himself Blood Herald of Taat, Jedi Maez. He struck them down with lightning, snuffed out their lives with but a gesture. Madness, hate, in his eyes as he cut down one after another."
"Taat is a Killik colony," Daer'ey'ath supplied over Jaina's earpiece. *"They are known for their stoicism and apathy towards others, including their own kind. But certainly not violence."*
"The enemy these Jedi were leading, they were Killik?" Jaina asked, holding her breath as she waited for an answer.
"Monstrosities, formidable warriors, insects, nest-minder, Killiks, they were all names we used to refer to them. But it was their actions that proved them to be a foe even we mighty Vagaari could not overcome. Before I entered my pod, I received word that the home world of the ancestors had fallen. That those who remained were being turned into either food or mindless drones of the nest-mind. Those left are Vagaari no more, simply walking shells of who they once were."
"Are there other bunkers like the one we found you in? Perhaps more of your people survived?"
"It is possible others have lived," Intarsesh shrugged apathetically. "We are a nomadic people and not everyone responds to the call of the *Miskara.* But it is of no consequence. If the combined might of our fleets could not stop our fall, a few scattered vessels will make little difference."
"We didn't detect any Killik ships in the system," Jaina pressed on. "In fact, if our suspicions are correct, they moved on from your space and have entered the known galaxy."
Intarsesh surprised Jaina by suddenly reaching out and grabbing her wrist. "Then pray, Jedi. Pray to whatever deity you believe in. There is no stopping them. No hope of victory."
Jaina very firmly removed his hand. "There is always hope, Grand Overseer. If it is as we believe, that the Killiks have moved on, will you be willing to help us reclaim Vagaari space?"
"A Vagaari soldier is always willing to claim what is rightfully theirs," the Vagaari leader rasped. The machine taking his vitals began to beep.

Baltke stepped in, placing a hand on Jaina's shoulder. "I'll have to sedate him. His neurological functions still haven't fully recovered from the sudden awakening. We probably did more than a few things wrong rushing them out of their pods like we did. 'Course, the only other option was to let them be crushed by several tons of rubble."
Jaina took a step back. "Okay, but we're going to need him functional as soon as possible. Do what you can."
"Never thought I'd ever be actually trying to *save* a Vagaari's life before. Let alone one of their leaders," Baltke snorted. He popped the tendons in his neck and stretched out his arms. "Alright then. You do what you have to do with the Assistant Syndic and leave this…person… to me. I'll keep the kids out of it for now too, right?"
"Right," Jaina breathed. "To be honest, I'm just taking things as they come. I don't have a single clue of what to expect next."
"If you were on Csilla, that honesty would have gotten you killed," Baltke remarked. "Then again, we're in Vagaari space, so we'll probably get killed anyways."
"That's what I love about you Chiss," Jaina said flatly. "So positively optimistic."
"And it's a small wonder why the Chiss Ascendancy adores you and Assistant Syndic Fel," Baltke retorted, shaking his head ruefully. "Where else would they find humans with your…unique…idealisms."
(-(-(V)-)-)
Coasting through the graveyard of Vagaari ships under minimal power, the Chiss and humans were in no hurry to reach Vagar Praxut. Though the Vagaari Grand Overseer had confirmed Killik involvement, the fact that no Killik vessels were seen, or any Killiks detected on the neighboring three planets, begged a few questions. Where had they gone? What were those X-wings and Clawcraft they had detected leaving the system? And more importantly, who did they leave behind? That could mean only one thing. The Killiks were on Vagar Praxut, their destination.
As they grew closer to the Vagaari home world, Jaina began to expend more and more effort to keep their approach undetected from the 'Jedi' she sensed residing there. From the Vagaari's descriptions there was little doubt that the 'Blood Herald' of Taat was former Death Knight, Maez. Drowning in sorrow and anger, the former Jedi had become a deep-space explorer, but had disappeared in the Unknown Regions after only a couple of months on the job. She had received word from the Jedi Order to keep an eye out for him, but it was as if he had vanished without a trace. To think that he had become a Joiner was disturbing, and somewhat scary.

Equally alarming and no less surprising was the name of 'Welk' once again popping up. Jaina had no good memories regarding the fallen Jedi she had met on Myrkr. Welk, along with his partner Lomi, had betrayed them all, overpowering a good friend and taking off with their primary means of escape. They had nearly gotten Anakin and Tahiri killed, gotten all of the Myrkr team killed, and that was something Jaina wasn't prepared to forgive any time soon. Then again, she supposed the feelings of the two former Jedi were mutual. Both he and Maez had no love for the Jedi, for her family specifically, and she doubted they would give her and the Chiss a warm welcome.

"So let me get this straight," Jagged said in a low voice in their shared bunk. "Two dark Jedi with grudges against your family have merged with a Killik force that's enslaved the Vagaari and, going off of Reya's report on how the Joiner's wants are absorbed by the nest that takes them in, they've most likely passed on their hatred of you to the entire Taat colony?"

Lying in the bunk next to him, Jaina nodded. "Probably. It explains why I'm feeling so many Force sensitives. Their Joining probably enabled them to use the Killiks as extensions of themselves, almost like a computer getting more processing power. But the dark side's twisted them, enhancing their hatred and desires."

"And we're heading to a planet where all several million beings on it want you dead," Jagged growled, his eyes darkening.

Jaina tilted her head up to give his cheek a brief kiss. "Nice that you care, Jagged. But me getting killed by a bunch of bugs drunk on the dark side is not going to happen."

"That is one thing we both agree on," Jagged replied gruffly, his arm around her waist tightening possessively.

"So, what's the plan?" Jaina murmured, sharing another kiss with her lover. "Do we return to Csilla with the Grand Overseer?"

"The Aristocras and Syndics would never take the word of a Vagaari," Jagged muttered, frustration in his voice. "The only way they'd accept Killik involvement in this issue is if we actually record footage of those…dark side inebriated bugs. And that means going to Vagar Praxut."

Jaina made a similar grimace. "I thought as much. Tried to hope for the best I suppose."

"What do you think the Killik were doing with Clawcraft?" Jagged asked after a measured pause. "Or X-wings for that matter."

"I can only think of one thing they'd be using Clawcraft for," Jaina ran a hand through her hair and turned in the bunk so that she was spooned up against the Assistant Syndic. "The Killiks were responsible for the

razing of the Chiss colony and Imperial systems in hopes of starting a war. When that didn't happen, they're probably falling back to their 'Plan B'. How do you think the Imperials will react if they suddenly get reports of Clawcraft attacking their vessels? It's not like anyone else in this galaxy is flying around with them."
"I was afraid that would be the case as well," Jagged held Jaina to him. "And it makes it all the more important that we go to Vagar Praxut. The Imperials will likewise need proof of Killik involvement if we are to avert a war. Hopefully, the Clawcraft were saw leaving the system were the first of many, and not the last."
There was a small ping, before Baltke's voice filled their quarters. "*Sir, ma'am, I've stabilized and awakened the Vagaari again."*
"We'll be right down, doctor."
The two swung themselves out of their bunk. Jaina pulled on her outer Jedi robes, while Jagged slung his white uniform jacket on with practiced efficiency.
"Intarsesh had a point though," Jaina said. "If even the combined Vagaari fleets couldn't stop the Killiks, what exactly are we supposed to do in a single picketship?"
"Something brave and daring befitting of our lineages," Jagged said drolly, fixing his cufflinks. "Preferably one that sees us coming home to accolades and millions of people grateful for the war we averted."
Jaina raised an amused eyebrow at her lover.
Jagged just shrugged, his face expressionless. "Of course, just making it back alive is just as preferable. I was hoping for the best."
"The latter sounds more doable," Jaina chuckled, rolling her eyes.
A very brief trek through their ship and they were soon standing before the medbay. Jaina swiped her hand over the medbay door panel, making final adjustments to her robes. The smiles melted from their faces as they regained a professional bearing and they stepped into the medbay, ready to meet with the Grand Overseer. Apparently Baltke had also awoken the two Vagaari children, and the two were talking in low voices with the Grand Overseer. The three Vagaari looked up at the entrance of the two humans.
"Your doctor tells me we are heading for Vagar Praxut," Intarsesh said, a note of incredulity creeping through his otherwise disciplined voice. "When I inquired about the strength of your forces, I was more than concerned. You are not warriors, but scientists and infants pretending to be warriors. You will be devoured whole and…"
"Okay, enough of the gloom and doom," Jaina cut him off. "I understand you're apprehensive about returning to Vagar Praxut. We are too. But this threatens more than just the Chiss, than the remnants

of your people. If the Killiks truly have established a power base here, they've been using it to launch attacks and destabilize the rest of the galaxy. This threat has to end."
"A foolish endeavor."
"Maybe," Jaina remarked. "But is not a fight against overwhelming odds, something a warrior such as you should be proud to go up against?"
"It would be no fight," Intarsesh sneered. "It would be slaughter."
"Then what do you plan to do?" Jagged cut in. "You are a leader of a people who no longer exist. Those of your kind, proud warriors that they were, now serve a new master. Will you admit the Vagaari were so weak, are you satisfied at seeing Vagaari work under the lash of another? Or will you help us do something about it?"
With the gaze of the two young Vagaari children staring up at him, Intarsesh growled. "Are you questioning my honor?"
"Yes," Jagged said simply. "I was under the impression Vagaari were formidable warriors. My own brother once had great respect for your people. At the moment, I cannot see any reason why I should continue believing this."
"If you wish to die a thousand deaths, far be it for me to stop you," Intarsesh grumbled. "I would only ask you kill me and the children should the Killiks overwhelm us. *I* for one, will be a slave to no creature."
"Soooo, you'll help us?" Jaina tried to clarify.
"I will…assist…you in your misguided quest," Intarsesh replied with the utmost reluctance.
"Good enough. What can you tell us about the layout of Vagar Praxut and anything you remember about the state of the planet before you went into stasis?"
Intarsesh looked resigned. "Though I do not see how this talking will help, I will tell you what you wish."
(-(-(VI)-)-)
The mess-hall of the *Placeholder*, wasn't exactly a hall. It was more like a storage room at the aft of the small ship with a single cabinet full of dried or frozen meals and a couple of plastisteel chairs. A constant rumbling from the ship's aging sublight engines caused minor oscillations to course through the metal flooring. It was a cramped space, one where the crew more often than not just grabbed what they needed and returned to their stations.
So far they had spent a galactic day and a half in the Vagar Praxut system. Though there was some urgency in stopping the exodus of pirate fighters, at the same time, they couldn't rush anything. The fact

that three full squadrons of fighters of various sorts appeared to be leaving the planet almost every seven hours indicated not only a very large labor force, but also a large force of pilots. There was also no telling what type of defenses existed on the planet, or what the capabilities were of the two fallen Jedi. With all the unknown factors, it was much safer for their very limited resources, if they took things as they came.

Jaina Solo was currently in the mess-hall doing just that; flipping through a datapad and brushing up on her Vagaari trivia with Feesa. Though the two might not ever be the best of friends, they had at least established a working relationship. And though it was a bit cramped, both Reya and Baltke were also squeezed into the tiny aft eating area, sharing notes on a possible way to undo the 'Joining' of any Vagaari Joiners they did encounter.

All conversation came to a stop, however, when they realized two sets of young eyes staring at them all. Both Vagaari teens were at the entrance, violet eyes taking in each of the people present. Their short stature and stubby fingers made them look younger than Chiss and humans their same age, but their postures were that of someone proud of their lineage.

"{You are formidable warriors?}" One of the two said, his two mouths making the sounds of his native tongue.

Jaina, being the only one with the Force and ability to understand the foreign tongue, stood from her chair. Approaching the two teens, she nodded. "We are."

"{Then you will slaughter the bug soldiers and avenge the *Vaga'ari*,}" the same child half asked, half ordered.

Rather than answer, Jaina squatted down to be eye-level with the teen. "What is your name?"

"{I am the future Supreme Commander of the *Vaga'ar*i Empire,}" the Vagaari stated emotionlessly. "{When the Grand Overseer and the rest of my race obliterate the Killiks, we will make them regret ever going against us and turn them into our slaves.}"

Jaina raised an eyebrow. "So, to right a wrong done to your people you'll do the exact same thing to the one that wronged you?"

"{It is the law of the *Vaga'ari* Empire. All other races exist to serve our own. Our ancestors will give us strength and bring woe upon all those who oppose the *Vaga'ari*.}"

"Is that so?"

"{So have the Supreme Commanders of the past said, and so shall it be done}," the Vagaari teen replied definitively. "{The very fact that our Grand Overseer still lives when everything else on the planet died

is proof that our ancestors shelter the spirit of the Vagaari people. And now they have chosen you all as their instruments of destruction. You will avenge my father, my mother. All the *Vaga'ari* who fell, and make it possible for my people to rise up again.}"
Despite his bravado and regurgitated doctrines, Jaina could sense sheer fear and desperation radiating from the teen. He was old enough to understand what it meant to have his people slaughtered, yet young enough to choose to believe that things could be made right again. Before she could say anything, however, Feesa cut in.
"{Why should we help your people, child of Supreme Commander Duresh?}" Feesa asked coolly, the strain on her vocal cords of speaking the Vagaari language—something normally spoken using sounds from two mouths—evident by the way she grimaced.
"{Why? Because our ancestors order you to…}"
"{I could care less about your ancestors, child. They were all mindless savages in my opinion.}"
"Feesa," Jaina tried, but the Chiss pressed on.
"{If saving your people means that you will continue practices that have brought misery and death to countless races, the Vagaari are better off dead.}"
"{Our ancestors gave us the right to conquer those people! We are *Vaga'ari*, they were weak!}"
"{And now who is the weak one? Who is enslaved? Whose fleet and warriors lay strewn about this system as if they were little more than glittergnats swatted away in annoyance?}"
Surprisingly, the Vagaari teen drew a small blade. "{Do not insult my ancestors or our warriors! I am the child of Supreme Commander Duresh and I will…}"
"{Grow up this instant,}" Feesa snapped, her red eyes almost apathetic to the young Vagaari's distress. "{Face reality, child of Duresh. Your people are on the verge of become an extinct species. You fought, the enemy was stronger than your warriors and your ancestors. All the bravery and blustering will not change that. If you think challenging me to a duel because I hurt your feelings is a smart thing to do, then it is no wonder why your people were defeated so quickly. You are Vagaari, so instead of moping about and looking for another warrior to solve your problems, start thinking about ways *you* can help.}"
The Vagaari's mouths opened and closed in complete shock.
"You take over," Feesa said to Jaina, her voice hoarse. "I hate their language almost as much as I hate their species."

Jaina watched with a raised eyebrow as Feesa filled up her canteen with water and made her way back to the bridge.
"Fun conversation?" Baltke said sarcastically. "If you want, I can always knock those two out again and we can space them at our earliest convenience."
"No one's spacing anyone," Jaina said flatly. "They're just kids."
"And they grow up sooner or later. Might as well put them out of their misery now," Baltke shrugged.
"You're a doctor."
"Sworn to help the Ascendancy remain strong. If we let a couple of space rats grow up and they start raiding Chiss colonies, I wouldn't be doing my duty. Don't looked so shocked. I'm not the only one who feels that way. The Vagaari have killed many Chiss over the years, most of them civilians. We'd be doing the galaxy a favor letting their race die today."
Jaina let out a breath of annoyance. "Baltke."
"What? Not like those space rats can understand me."
"They can understand your tone," Jaina muttered, glaring at the Chiss. "And we need Vagaari help to keep what happened to their people from happening to the Ascendancy. Or have you forgotten High Command decided to ignore our warnings about the Killiks and assume that no threat will be coming from the Vagaari Way?"
"Very well," Baltke glowered. "I'll go back to trying to figure out a way to save the Vagaari without frying their brains. This is on you if the Vagaari start killing innocents again."
Jaina shook her head and returned her attention back to the two children. Though the more talkative of the two seemed to have no idea of what had just been said, she could feel a surprising amount of hurt and fear radiate from the second of the two. Peering past the child of the Supreme Commander, Jaina made a mental note to find out his name, she studied the second Vagaari child for the first time. Though she wasn't an expert in Vagaari physiology, not that the two were much different in terms of physical features, from the slighter build of the second child, Jaina could tell that the child was female.
"You understood us?" Jaina asked the more silent of the two Vagaari children.
"I am the daughter of Intarsesh, Elansh. I will be the Grand Overseer of my people once I have proven my worth, the future wife of the Supreme Commander. Of course your tongue will be known to me," the girl spoke in very accented Basic, her tone and bearing no less than that of her counterpart. Her twin mouths allowed her to inject more

emotional inflection into her words than most people could, which definitely caught the attention of the other two Chiss.
Jaina motioned briefly to the other child. "Future wife to him?"
"Yes," Elansh held her head up high. "Our great leader, the *Miskara* decreed that the bloodlines of our people's rulers should be united so that we will be strong. He gave his daughter to the Grand Overseer and the two had me. Supreme Commander Duresh was mated to a descendant of the previous *Miskara*, and they had Ariarsh. When I am old enough, the child of Ariarsh and myself will be the ruler of all that is *Vaga'ari* and be the strongest of *Vaga'ari*. Our people are not yet dead so long as Ariarsh and myself draw the breath of life into our bodies."
Expression softening, Jaina reached out a hand. "A heavy burden for those so young."
"We are *Vaga'ari*, our age does not matter. A Wolvkil does not care if its claws slice the belly of adult or child; all *Vaga'ari* are taught that," Elansh said defiantly. "We will carry our burden no matter how heavy. The future of our race depends on it."
"I know what that's like," Jaina sighed, sitting back on her haunches. "Carrying the weight of your people on your shoulders."
Rather than reply to Jaina, Elansh took a brief moment to fill in her counterpart on everything that had been said. Ariarsh jerked in alarm back towards Jaina the moment Elansh was finished. "{You would abandon the *Vaga'ari* to die? You would side with the Killiks?}"
"I would not, but your people have a long history with the Chiss," Jaina explained, using the Force to help Ariarsh understand her words. "You say that if we were to help you restore the Vagaari Empire, you would return to the old ways. The ways of your ancestors."
"{We are *Vaga'ari*, there are no other ways for us. It is what my father taught me, what his father taught him. As we roamed the stars, it is what we have learned. To dominate or be dominated. To settle and be destroyed, or travel and be the destroyers. When the Killiks came, not all *Vaga'ari* were here. They were saved because they call no one planet home, no one system more important than another. We are *Vaga'ari*, taking what we need, living and surviving, that is the Way of the Ancestors. That will be our way of the future.}"
"Is it possible for the Vagaari and Chiss to live in peace?" Jaina asked the young minds before her. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw Baltke throw up his hands in exasperation. With a quick use of the Force, however, she silenced the bitter remark about to emerge from his lips. Obviously fed up, Baltke glared at her and stormed out of the mess-area, shaking his head. Both Vagaari children watched him leave.

"It will not be possible," Elansh said coldly. "The Chiss see themselves as higher than our ancestors, have butchered our people and hunted us for sport. Entire *Vaga'ari* families have died at their hands. We will be more than content to watch the Killiks devour their worlds too."
Jaina shivered at the sheer hatred coming from the young girl. "Then what will that solve?"
"{It will prove the ancestors were with us after all. For the *Vaga'ari* still live, but the Chiss will destroy themselves without their tyrannical leaders to guide them.}"
"Maybe afterwards, there can be peace," Elansh offered half-heartedly. "Once the Chiss have been humbled. Once they see that they are more cowards than warriors. That the *Vaga'ari* are strong and proud people who will bend but never break. *Maybe* then we will welcome them into *our* Empire."
Jaina place a hand on each of a shoulder of each of the two children. "You understand that the Empire you had no longer is? That you cannot be like the Chiss and toss aside allies purely out of spite, or enslave them because it is what you are capable of? Yes, your people and the Chiss are mortal enemies, but in the face of a threat like the Killiks, is it not better to have friends instead of more enemies? I will not try to change the Vagaari culture. That is not my right. But many lives can be saved, many lives can be strengthened, if the Chiss and Vagaari join forces against the Killiks. The two of you were there. You saw how easily the Vagaari and their slaves were brushed aside. Look at me now and tell me that the Vagaari alone have the strength needed to beat the Killiks. That the Chiss, cowards you think they are, have what it takes to beat the Killiks all by themselves."
Both Vagaari children exchanged questioning glances, unable to meet Jaina's eyes.
"The times are changing," Jaina continued on in a gentle voice. "I'll help you reclaim your empire because it is the Jedi thing to do. Now you must decide whether it is the Vagaari thing to do to repeat old mistakes, continue to bear old grudges and ancient practices, when creatures like the Killiks are capable of making those grudges pointless."
"We just want things to go back to the way they were," Elansh said in a quieter voice, her head bowed. "Ariarsh and myself had our families, ships of them. Fleets at our command. We had followers to do our bidding, the best every system had to offer at our fingertips. We were to be the next leaders of the Empire, the start of a true dynasty."
"And you can still have that," Jaina said consolingly. "You can have friends who will follow you. You can have your people looking to you for

protection and advice. But at the same time, the two of you don't have to be the only ones to look out for your people. Make your reign remembered not by the terror you caused or the planets you enslaved, but by the strength of character of your people. I agree, the Chiss are not yet ready to enter into a treaty with you, but when they are…"
"{We will…consider it,}" Ariarsh finally whispered. "{In exchange, the Killiks…}"
Jaina lightly touched the top of his head. "We'll get rid of them together. Vagaari, Chiss, humans. We will do what a single race could not."
Ariarsh and Elansh bowed their heads low. They then walked passed Jaina, snagged a few food containers, and left without another word.
It was then that Jaina realized Reya had yet to leave the room. "Enjoy the show, operative?"
"As far as I could understand it," Reya answered with a nod. "Do you truly believe Chiss and Vagaari can be allies one day?"
"The alternative is that the two of you continue to fight wholly pointless skirmishes, killing each other for territory and resources not worth the lives being lost," Jaina said flatly. "I meant what I said. Unless the Chiss get their act together and realize they aren't the only power out here in the Unknown Regions, they'll find themselves in a galaxy of trouble when they find themselves in need of allies and friends."
(-(-(VII)-)-)
Hiding in the gravitational shadow of one of Vagar Praxut's largest moons—the planet itself had three moons of different size—the Chiss picketship *Placeholder,* and her three Clawcraft escort, prepared to face entirely unfavorable odds. Two weeks of preparation, a careful approach to the primary planet in the system, it was now coming down to the options their meager force had available to them.
"The moment we began to move against the structures on the planet, it's very likely Welk and Maez will detect it," Jaina informed everyone.
"And if there are any Joiners or Killiks who see us, the rest of the Killik and Joiner population will become aware due to their hive mentality," Reya added.
"I don't see how we're going to be able to pull this off," Rotog said grimly. "The scans, coupled with the intel provided by that Vagaari Grand Overseer show that two whole continents down there have been converted for the processing of resources and building of ships. The only way we can stop their capabilities is by a full-scale bombardment with ships we don't have."

"Or, we use gravity-well projectors," Intarsesh spoke up from the back of the room.
Eyes turned to him in curiosity. "Gravity-well projectors would only work if we had the ability to keep the Killik forces in the system," Jagged said evenly.
"So we do not use it on ships," Intarsesh replied. "We turn the gravity well onto the planet instead. It is how my people conquered the Geroons. The space-battle was faring poorly, but we began destroying their civilian populations by targeting their cities with our gravity wells. The increase gravitational forces tore apart the cities and caused groundquakes that devastated their planet. The Geroon navy surrendered shortly after."
"But we're talking about using this technology on your home world. There's a chance we won't have the opportunity to save the Vagaari and others still on it."
"Better they die than disgrace themselves by living under the invisible lash of the Killiks," Intarsesh replied tonelessly. The two Vagaari children at his side nodding in agreement. "As for the planet, *Vaga'ari* live among the stars. We need no planet to remind us of who we are."
"That's great and all," Feesa said shortly. "But you're forgetting that we're several gravity wells short. Unless the Vagaari have another fleet in reserve…" She trailed off at the blank expression on Intarsesh's face. "You have another fleet in reserve."
"We have said it before. The *Vaga'ari* claim no planet as their home. Though the planet of our origins, the home of our ancestors, Vagar Praxut's sole importance is it is the spiritual center of our people. So many *Vaga'ari* answered the call to war not only to test their might against a foe, but to prevent the Killik threat from polluting the essence that is Vagar Praxut. When it became clear the battle would be lost, all other *Vaga'ari* simply retreated to other parts of *Vaga'ari* space. Part of being a skilled warrior, after all, is knowing when to retreat to fight another day."
"Why didn't you tell us this before?" Baltke barked.
"It would have made little difference. Would you gamble the last hope of your people on plans made by your sworn enemies?"
"In any case, any attack would have been picked up by Welk and Maez," Jaina said, coming to the defense of the Vagaari. "Jedi are capable of detecting any overt threats towards their person. A war fleet coming to attack the planet would definitely cause a disturbance in the Force."
"So his survivors don't change anything?" Rotog said, puzzled.

"No, it changes everything," Feesa countered, staring at Intarsesh coldly. "But it will count on us trusting the Vagaari."
"Out of the question!" Baltke barked.
"Agreed," Rotog said quickly. "I've seen the aftermath of their attacks on our colonies to know that the Vagaari can *never* be trusted."
"Unfortunately, I have to agree," Reya added. "I may not be an expert on them, but in the past, the Vagaari have broken their word when the situation suited them."
"But it's not up to the three of you, is it?" Jaina said, her voice glacial. "Assistant Syndic Fel is the one in charge of this operation."
Jagged inclined his head in Jaina's direction, before turning his attention to Feesa and Intarsesh. "You have a plan in mind?"
"If the Chiss and humans are as formidable as they claim to be, you should have no objections to it," Intarsesh started off. "The Jedi Solo spoke truly. Our counter-attacks were always detected by the Killiks before we even arrived in system; our vessels destroyed the moment they emerged from hyperspace."
"But if the attention of the two fallen Jedi were occupied somehow," Feesa said. "Then the Vagaari could approach Vagar Praxut without any trouble. All we have to do is distract this Maez and Welk until the Vagaari fleet is in orbit and ready to use their gravity-well projectors. Once that happens, the Killiks will be unable to stop the Vagaari in time. In order to ensure that we have the attention of Maez and Welk, however, we will have to land on the planet and make our presence known. Force the two to expend resources containing us and keep their attentions focused on us."
"So, let me get this straight," Baltke was shaking his head. "You want us to be on the planet when the Vagaari start ripping it to pieces? Ripping their own home world to dust? And you want to trust them with our lives? Are you crazy, Chaf'ees'aklaio? Why are you even listening to this space rat?"
"Tib'alt'keti," Jagged said, using the man's full name. "Unless you have a better option…"
"I do," Baltke replied waspishly. "We return to Ascendancy space, show them what we have, and come back with a fleet and a planet destroying bomb. With all due respect, Assistant Syndic, none of us here are commandos. We were barely given enough supplies to get out here and come back. Now that we know the scale of the threat, I say we return."
"As the Jedi Ambassador said, the decision lies with me," Jagged stared the man down. "The Killiks have had at least five years to operate the factories and strip mine this system. That's five years worth of pirate

vessels and intrigue they could stir up in the greater galaxy. Unless we start shutting down these factories, taking out the Killik leadership, nothing will change. There is no guarantee that the fallen Jedi will be on the planet when we return. No guarantee that the Killiks won't come back to finish off the Vagaari or stir up more trouble between the Chiss and Remnant. Besides, if we return with a fleet we will run into the same problems the Vagaari have. The two Joined Jedi will detect our approach and plan accordingly. No, we have to stop them now, and with the aid of the Vagaari, we have the means to do so."
"Sir," Rotog spoke up. "There have to be hundreds of thousands of Joiners on the planet. Not to mention who knows how many Killiks on the ground. We're just a supply clerk, a desk agent, a doctor, a Vagaari sympathizer, three marines, three pilots, and you and the Jedi. There's no possible way we'll be able to survive this."
"And I thought all Chiss were willing to give their lives for their Ascendancy," Intarsesh commented evenly. "I am ready to die for my people, are you?"
"Says the ruler who decided to hide in a stasis pod while his subordinates starved to death," Baltke snorted.
"Enough," Jagged barked. "Grand Overseer. If we play the bait, can your people finish the job?"
"You truly believe we can win this, human?"
"I do," Jagged replied evenly.
"Spoken like a true warrior," Intarsesh tilted his head. "Then if you are committed to the cause, I suggest you pilot your ship to the second moon. There, three Vagaari commando units are preserved in stasis pods. As the moons are relatively worthless in mineral content, their pods should remain undisturbed. In the mean time, grant me access to your communication's system and Ariarsh will rally our fleets."
"I was unaware the position of Supreme Commander was hereditary," Feesa commented, glancing at the Vagaari youth as she spoke.
"It is now," Intarsesh's grin revealed the sharp rows of teeth in both of his mouths. "One of the perks of being the only leader to survive is that the *Vaga'ari* Empire is temporarily my own to command. They will listen to Ariarsh, son of Duresh, Supreme Commander of the fleets of the *Vaga'ari* Empire, or the ancestors will destroy their clans and bring plagues to their food stores."
"And are you ready for such a burden, Ariarsh?" Jagged raised an eyebrow.
The Vagaari teen straightened as much as his full height would allow him to. Even then he was only as tall as Jagged's stomach."{I am. My

father trained me from birth to be the next leader of our fleets, I will take on that responsibility.}"
Jagged continued to regard the Vagaari teen with an unreadable expression.
Ariarsh finally bowed his head and looked away. After he swallowed several times, he finally turned his gaze back to Jagged, then to Jaina and Intarsesh. "{Though I would…appreciate… any wisdom you might have to share about this matter. I have only commanded fleets in simulations.}"
"That is why I will be accompanying you," Intarsesh said, his voice almost grandfatherly as he placed a large hand on one of the child's shoulders. "By your leave, human."
"Agent Daer'ey'ath, assist them," Jagged gestured. He then nodded to two of the CEDF marines. "Tlarik, Khana, go with them."
Chiss discipline overriding her own prejudices, Reya snapped off a sharp salute and motioned for the two Vagaari to follow them.
"Chaf'ees'aklaio, set course for the second moon."
"Understood, sir," Feesa likewise saluted and headed towards the cockpit.
Once she was gone, Baltke stepped forward and approached Jagged, his face a mask of fury.
"Sir, I must protest this course of action," Baltke hissed in a low voice. He pointed aggressively towards the communication's room. "Chiss have never trusted the Vagaari, and for good reason. Hundreds of Chiss have died at their hands, hundreds more were forced to be their living shields, strapped to the outsides of their spacecraft and left to die a terror-filled death. The Vagaari are nothing more than vicious savages, slavers, and primitive rats. We shouldn't even be contemplating an alliance with them!"
"That's funny."
The voice of Elansh, the daughter of Intarsesh, seemed to startle Baltke. It was clear the medical officer had forgotten she was still in the room.
"Funny?" Baltke sneered.
"Yes, unless I do not understand your language as well as I thought I did, all the words you used to describe us, father and the other *Vaga'ari* elders used them to describe you," Elansh said darkly. "'Vain,' 'self-absorbed,' 'envious' are but a few others."
"And why would the Ascendancy be envious of you?" Baltke snarled, towering over the unwavering Vagaari teen.
"Because we represent life in chaos, success without the discipline and order you Chiss cannot live without. We are an anathema to your well-

ordered minds, proof that a society can exist with the barest minimum of rules and regulations. Your kind sees this and are envious, desire the same freedoms the *Vaga'ari* have, and lash out like ill-mannered children who don't get their way."
"*We* do not need to enslave races to prove our superiority," Baltke growled. "Nor do we need to strap our prisoners onto our ships like living shields."
"If the Chiss had been willing to trade for shield-technology, the *Vaga'ari* wouldn't have to," Elansh countered, standing her ground. Her accent and emotions made her words almost unintelligible, but those in the room could still understand her. "And look at you, Chiss. Here you are trying to defend your ways to a 'space rat' who hasn't even gone through her ceremony of adulthood yet."
Baltke drew his side arm, pointing the barrel square at Elansh's forehead, his red eyes gleaming murderously. "Enough!"
Jaina immediately stepped between the two, ensuring the Vagaari teen was safely behind her. With another gesture, the blaster flew out of Baltke's hand and clattered across the floor. "This isn't helping any, Baltke. Stand down."
Baltke just growled and spun around, storming out of the room. His rage could be felt in the Force, dark and sickening. It was obvious to Jaina that his hatred of the Vagaari stemmed from more than just cultural beliefs.
"{You defended me,}" Elansh seemed completely shocked. "{Even when you didn't have to.}"
Jaina looked over her shoulder and saw the Vagaari teen looking up at her in surprise. Standing in the doorway behind her were Intarsesh and Ariarsh, both clearly having seen most of what had just unfolded.
"We're allies," Jaina said calmly. "That's what allies do. That's the difference between a friend and a slave. A friend will defend you, even if it isn't required of them. They will tell you if you are out of line, will support you in times of need. I know it will be a long time, but I am hoping that the Vagaari, the Chiss, and my own people can eventually become the allies we have to become if we are to survive this."
As if her words had cursed the mission, Feesa's voice came over the intercom. *"Just received a priority communiqué from Csilla. The Imperials have begun a full-scale invasion of Ascendancy space. We are being recalled immediately to fight in the war."*
All eyes, Chiss, human, and Vagaari turned to Jagged. The scion of the Antilles and Fel lines kept his face as impassive as ever as he met each of their gazes. Finally, he walked over to the intercom and activated it.

"Major, inform High Command that the message is received but at this moment we are unable to comply with the orders given. However, we will return to aid the Ascendancy as soon as we are able."
"Understood, sir."
"Sir?" Rotog frowned.
"You heard the Jedi Ambassador, Lieutenant. Chiss, Vagaari, and human are going to have to work together to end this. You've seen the numbers. You know the Chiss will not last long against the odds they face. For too long have they combated technologically or numerically inferior opponents out here in the Unknown Regions. They have never faced a well-equipped, well-trained force whose military doctrines they have partially adopted for their own navy. A lone picketship and three fighters will not turn the tide of the war." Jagged very calmly walked over to Intarsesh. "But if we are to help the Vagaari reclaim their spiritual center, they will be honor bound to help the Chiss do the same." Intarsesh inclined his head in silent acknowledgment. "What will accomplish more, lieutenant? A picketship and three Clawcraft, or the combined might of the Vagaari Empire allied with the forces of the Chiss Ascendancy?"
"I see your point, sir," Rotog tilted his head reluctantly. "What are your orders?"
"Prepare to go ahead with our plan as discussed. Now that there is a new urgency to help reclaim Vagar Praxut, failure is no longer an option."
(-(-(Chapter End)-)-)

Zekk
(-(-(I)-)-)
The Relephon Moon of Sapphire glimmered in its blue glory as it once again orbited out from the shadow of the gas giant and into the sparkling glow of the Transitory Mists; a naturally occurring ocean of ionized particles that had kept Hapes isolated from the rest of the galaxy for several millennia. However, before the day had even begun, the training room of the Sapphire Palace, ancestral home to House AlGray, was already occupied with ten individuals.
"You did tell Zekk we were having our anti-Force training session in the morning, right?" Trista glanced to her sister. The two were waiting with the rest of their squad on cushioned mats, looking to the room's double doors.
"I sent him a message," Taryn muttered, her own gaze locked to the crystalline skylight that allowed the green light of the Transitory Mists and the blue of Relephon to fill the room.

"Taryn?"
"It's nothing," Taryn said quickly.
"You had a fight," Trista stated.
"It's nothing," Taryn repeated, glaring at her twin.
Trista emitted a small laugh and shook her head. "Oh, Taryn."
"What?" Taryn glowered.
"Just kiss and make up already," Trista said flatly.
"I agree!" One of their squadmates, Corporal Ria Tese, chimed in.
"If you don't want him, I wouldn't mind making him a consort," Corporal Aros called out in jest.
Trista let her head loll back to glance at the last speaker. "House Zel claims him regardless of what my sister does or doesn't do, hands off."
Taryn could only sit there, her face growing increasingly red.
"Nothing's going to happen. Not any time soon. He's more of a coward than I thought he was."
"Oh?" Trista said patiently.
"Instead of facing his fears, he avoids them," Taryn continued to grumble. "Thinks that running away from his problems is better than confronting them head on. Who cares that he used to be a dark Jedi? That he learned things Jedi normally reject? He should be using those abilities to help others, regardless of who he learned them from. I mean, what does he think I'm doing here? I certainly didn't come here for a nice relaxing break."
"Okay…." Trista shook her head pityingly, patting her sister on her back in understanding.
The others of their squad smiled affectionately at the twins, some nodding their heads sympathetically to Taryn's little rant, others rolling their eyes.
"Well," Captain Moreem Espara stood. "If he isn't going to be here in the next five minutes, we should get started on our investigation. I compiled a list of people we can interview and a rudimentary timeline of events based off of my analysis of the comm-logs and holocam footage. We can start…."
The doors to the room opened with an audible whoosh of air, and all eyes turned towards the new arrival. Expectant faces fell, however, when they saw someone they weren't expecting.
A tattooed, blue-skinned Twi'lek sauntered into the room, one hand raised in greeting. What immediately caught everyone's attention was the lightsaber she had in her *other* hand.
What caught Taryn's attention specifically was *whose* lightsaber the Twi'lek was holding. There was no mistaking the Jedi weapon she had helped Zekk put together the night before. There was even less doubt

when the Twi'lek activated the blade and a crimson beam with a white core shot out with a snap-hiss.
Hands went to side-arms, the gathered group of royal guardswomen warily eyeing the newcomer.
"Pretty weapon, no? Almost as pretty as the guy I took this from," the Twi'lek said casually, yellow eyes staring down Taryn all the while.
"Where, did you get that from?" Taryn hissed, every word stressed with a lethal promise should the answer not be to her liking.
"From a Jedi I killed," the Twi'lek said carelessly. "Rather easy too. He was so distracted by this fight he had with some idiot girl that I was able to lop his head off, like this." The Twi'lek absently flicked her wrist, and the saber sliced through the air and through an imaginary neck.
Every muscle in Taryn's body tensed at those words, her normally warm gray eyes losing all emotion. Taryn uncoiled from her seated position like a Deryvian cobra, the grip around the butt of her blaster white. "Is that so?"
"Oh yes," the Twi'lek's smile grew wider. Like a mongoose, she continued to bait the deadly serpent poised to strike at her. The rest of the squad seemed to fade away as Taryn's sharp eyes followed the Twi'lek's every movement. "It was rather pathetic. Wasn't even a challenge, really. One moment he's standing there in one piece, the next, his head is in one corner and his body in the next. And I got myself a free Jedi sword. If all Jedi were as weak as he was, it's no wonder this galaxy's falling apart."
Taryn drew her blaster in the blink of an eye, only to have it wrenched from her hand by a violent, invisible tug. She pulled out her vibroblade, but this time the invisible Force slammed into her chest and sent her flying into her squadmates, knocking her unconscious.
The Twi'lek shook her head in disbelief. "All too easy."
The sound of nine other blasters charging didn't even seem to faze her. "Really, if you little girls wanted to fight a dark Jedi, a real one, you'd be slaughtered in a second," the Twi'lek winked at them, and then appeared to vanish right in front of their eyes.
The Hapan squad quickly formed into a circle in the center of the room, guns tracing every square centimeter. The Twi'lek suddenly appeared between two of them, though, hands reaching out to tap the back of their necks. "Bam, bam, dead and dead."
Like stringless puppets, both Hapan commandos dropped to the ground. Blasters were swung in the Twi'lek's direction, but she was already gone. Ria bent down to check on her fallen comrades. A quick check of their pulse, and the tension left her shoulders somewhat. She glanced towards Moreem. "They're still alive, captain."

A shadow appeared behind the Hapan captain, and the wide-eyed commando suddenly brought up her blaster and fired. The captain, however, was jerked in front of the shot and the bolt of red hit her in the shoulder.
"Ria!" One of the other commandos yelled, training her own blaster on the shooter.
"I saw her," Ria insisted. "She was behind the captain and…" A blaster from behind sounded and Ria collapsed to the ground. Fortunately, it had been a stun blast, but Ria's shooter seemed just as shocked as everyone else when Ria fell.
"I thought she was…she was that Twi'lek," Lovett said in bewilderment. Shortly after, her eyes rolled back up into her head and she too collapsed.
The five who were left abruptly trained their blaster one and other, uncertain who the enemy was.
"Enough!" Moreem barked, clutching her injured shoulder. "Everyone, guns down."
Her squad immediately obeyed. The moment they did, the Twi'lek reappeared, palm on her forehead as she shook her head. "Okay, really? A dark Jedi's trying to kill all of you and the first thing you do, well apart from shooting each other, is to put *down* your weapons?"
"If you wanted to kill us, you would have done so already," Moreem said coolly.
"Can't I play with my food?" the Twi'lek said angelically.
"Zekk's still alive, isn't he?" Trista spoke up, rising from where she had been covering her sister's downed form.
"Whatever makes you feel better," the Twi'lek quipped. She made a sweeping gesture with her hands, and the commandos who were unconscious began to wake. Once the Twi'lek had all of their attention, she placed a hand on one hip and smirked. "For the pop quiz in dark Jedi butt-kickery, you all have failing grades. The only upside is that at least you aren't dead. The name's Alema, Alema Rar, and I'm here to teach you pieces of cannon fodder how to survive longer than a couple of seconds against my emotionally disturbed brethren."
"Where's Zekk?" Taryn hissed, looking absolutely malevolent as she pushed one of her red braids back into its proper place. At her side, Trista was continuously whispering hurried reassurances. "The truth this time!"
"Still hung up on him?" Alema blinked. Seeing that most of the squad wasn't going to listen to a thing she said if she didn't answer, Alema sighed and jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "He's in his quarters. I tied him to his bed when he fell asleep and left a ysalamir next to him.

You know, the creature that keeps Jedi from doing their Jedi stuff? Now, do you want to learn how to fight dark Jedi or not?"
Warily, the group of Hapans stared at Alema as if she was some sort of insane maniac.
"What do you have in mind?" Moreem spoke up, nursing the burn wound on her shoulder. "We'd like to be in one piece for these 'lessons.'"
"Alright, fine. No dismemberment, decapitation, or otherwise permanent damage," Alema almost appeared to pout. "But everything else is mandatory. You can't beat dark Jedi if you're afraid of a little pain. You can't beat them by being nice. And you certainly can't beat them if the only thing going through your head when you're fighting them is the well-being of the others around you. Fear, rage, jealousy, hatred, doubt, they're all tools a dark Jedi can and will use against you."
"How?" One of the other commandos frowned.
Alema's eyes darted to each of the women. "Each of you have secrets, have things that make you doubt about something. I hide in those doubts, into those areas of your mind that you're afraid to go, and I can make myself invisible to your eyes. I can see you, but you wouldn't even be able to feel me if I brushed past you. *That's* just a small part of what any competent dark Jedi can do. They can destroy minds, turn friends into enemies, use your love to make you hate, your kindness to make you apathetic. Give them just the slimmest of opportunities and they'll make you pay for it dearly."
"And you'll teach us how to guard against this?" Trista said, not at all fazed by Alema's propagandistic spiel.
"If you want. Not promising that you'll survive your encounter with a dark Jedi, just that you'll last marginally longer than your untrained counterparts."
"That's good enough for me," Trista said neutrally.
Alema smirked. "You, I can work with. Your sister, not so much. She always that…impulsive?"
"It's just this location," Taryn grumbled, still leaning against her sister. "I don't exactly have the best of memories here."
Alema tilted her head to the side, yellow eyes boring into Taryn's gray, trying to see inside the younger woman's head. As she did, the memories Taryn was thinking about came to the surface…
(-(-(II)-)-)
Two years ago
Her footsteps echoed in the empty transit center of the Sapphire Palace, stretching out through the darkened room. For Taryn, the vast

chamber was pitch black. Being Hapan, unlike most near-human races, meant that she had no natural night-vision. With the only light filtering into the room coming from the door she had left open, she was as good as blind. She knew that somewhere in the room was the tram-line that took guests from the local starport to the palace. That one wall was lined with exotic weaponry from throughout the ages. She even remembered that the transit center had three levels, two of them catwalks that stretched out above her head.
But all of that was blended in with the natural darkness of the unlit room; the hangar doors for the tram cars were closed, and all windows shuttered.
Taryn took another step, doing her best to keep calm. In one hand, she gripped the crumpled up note she had found on her pillow. She held the other out in front of her to keep herself from walking into anything. Another step.
The words of the letter cycling through her mind.
Lady Taryn Zel,
I have uncovered information regarding the true culprit. Unfortunately, this information still implicates my brother. Please meet me and your sister tonight in the transit center so we can discuss how to best resolve this situation.
Sincerely,
Tiraena AlGray
"Tiraena?" Taryn called out into the impenetrable cloak of blackness all around her. Her only response was the echo of her own voice. "Trista?"
Suddenly the door she came through slammed shut, and Taryn was plunged into complete darkness. Heart pounding, Taryn turned left and right, hoping to see someone, anyone. Hoping to see a source of light. She took several frantic steps back the way she came, only to trip over a power cord and stumble to the ground. A single bank of lights lit up on the opposite side of the room, drawing Taryn's attention.
When the red-haired teen looked, however, her mouth went dry. Dangling from one of the catwalks, nooses wrapped around their necks was both Zedal and Trista. They were obviously still alive, and just as obviously trying to keep the metal wire rope from digging into their necks.
"Trista! Zedal!" Taryn scrambled to her feet.
"You'll be staying right there," a voice, cold and calculating called out. Taryn turned her head to see Tiraena standing on another catwalk, a remote control in her hands.
"Tiraena! What's the meaning of this?"

"Foolish girl," Tiraena shook her head. "We'll make it simple for you. You don't do what we want, and those two die a *very* slow and painful death. A push of a button on this controller electrifies the cables around their necks. Another push increases the tension, letting the cable slice through their fingers and necks."
"Zedal's your own brother!" Taryn yelled.
"And he wouldn't be in this position if it weren't for your sister and that Lieutenant Espara," Tiraena shouted back. "If they had only accepted the report, not intervened when you were sentenced, then our darling baby brother would still be alive. But no, they had to come here, bringing you. They had to get our brother involved. And what were we to do?"
Taryn cast a frantic glance at where both Zedal and Trista were struggling to breathe as the metal cables continued to constrict around their necks. "Let them go! I'll do what you want!"
Tiraena tossed down a small device, and Taryn reflexively caught it. "That's a recording device. Admit that you were responsible for the information leaks, that you were the sole person responsible, and we'll cut them down."
The seventeen year old girl looked at the device, then at Trista's dangling figure. Despite her situation, Trista was frantically shaking her own head, gray eyes pleading with her twin not to give in. Taryn's gaze traveled over to Zedal, who was likewise shaking his head, the anguish on his face reflecting the turmoil she felt within.
"You swear to let them live if I do this?" Taryn called out, tearing her gaze away from the ghastly sight of her sister and her almost-fiancé slowly suffocating to death.
"You'll record your confession even if we don't," Tiraena glowered. "You are in no positions to make demands of us. You should only know that those two will die if you don't do as we say."
Taryn swallowed painfully, her hands shaking as she held the recording device up to her lips. But then she heard a voice whisper her name, a voice that seem to come from all over the darkened transit center. Taryn used the recording device to hide a relieved smile, and she closed her eyes, a single tear escaping.
"What kept you?" Taryn gritted out in a strangled laugh.
A blade of emerald green cut through the pitch blackness of the cavernous room, attracting the attention of both Hapans as it made a lazy arc through the air. The blade suddenly picked up speed, and like a bullet, sliced through the tops of the cables holding Zedal and Trista. Both fell for a fraction of a second, before an invisible Force gently lowered them the rest of the way to the ground.

The blade flew back to its origin, and Zekk emerged from the shadows behind Taryn like a protective guardian.
"Next time you leave a message telling the lieutenant and I that you're following a cryptic letter that's probably a trap, can you please tell us where you're going?" Zekk said dryly. He pulled out a comlink. "Found her, they're in the transit center."
"I had a lot on my mind," Taryn quipped weakly, taking one of his hands and squeezing it tightly. "I'll try to make the next note more coherent."
"Let's hope there isn't a next time."
Despite Zekk's appearance, Tiraena looked far from shocked. "So, you brought a Jedi here? Even better. A Jedi and a member of the royal family conspiring against the Queen Mother! Think of the scandal!"
"Why are you doing this?" Zekk asked firmly, the Force behind his words.
"'Why' you ask?" Tiraena laughed maddeningly, as if she hadn't even been affected by his attempt to persuade her with the Force. "Think about it. The Queen Mother becomes unable to stop the execution of her dearest cousins; who evidence shows betrayed her. What do you think this will do to her? To her resolve. It will become an even greater victory to put some blame on the Jedi Order! The nobles will rise up and demand she step down or publicly denounce the Jedi. Then we shall see if she is really a loyal daughter of Hapes, or a Jedi pretender!"
"You're insane!" Taryn yelled.
In response, Tiraena held up a small spherical object. In an almost careless fashion, she let it roll off the catwalk she was on, where it landed next to a still recovering Trista and Zedal. The action happened in a split second, and by the time Zekk and Taryn realized what it was, it was too late to act.
"No!" Taryn screeched, the thermal detonator turning the area her twin and Zedal were into a blazing inferno.
While this was happening and the shock still fresh, three beams of light —high intensity sniper rounds—punched through the transit center wall and caught the distracted Zekk off guard. Two punched through his chest, the other through one leg, and he fell to the ground, his hand slipping out of Taryn's grip.
Taryn stared at Zekk's fallen form in abject terror. "No," she whispered hoarsely.
"I'll take that confession any time now, Lady Zel," Tiraena said patronizingly.
Taryn's eyes snapped back up to the AlGray noble lady, blazing in pure rage and distress. "You're dead!"

To accentuate her statement, the hangar doors blew open, as did several of the roof's closed-off skylights. Hapan commandos began fast-roping down, others storming through the remains of the hangar door.
Tiraena glared and pressed a button on the remote she was holding. The lights in the room flared on, and a part of the floor retracted. Rising up in its place were dozens of security droids, armed and ready for a fight. With a superior tilt of her head, Tiraena activated the droids, and chaos ensued.
Blaster fire rang out in every direction, the enclosed nature of the room fast turning the din deafening. Smoke, ozone, shouts of orders being given coincided with the machine language the droids used to communicate.
But while the lights illuminating the building floor had flared on, those in the upper level had gone dark, cloaking Tiraena from sight. Not that Taryn was going to let the woman get away. The red-haired warrior teen sprinted through the firefight without a single care, hurdling over a droid, pushing aside a fellow commando. She ran along one of the far walls, yanking a bladed pole-arm from its display case before leaping onto one of the maintenance ladders. Blaster fire continued to sound as the commandos and droids battled it out, but Taryn ignored it.
Ascending the ladder, Taryn reached the top catwalks and took a moment to get her bearings. The commandos who had breached the ceiling had left sizable holes where the light from Relephon shone through. Shafts of blue light lanced through the shadows, hiding and revealing things at the same time.
Taryn saw a dart of movement on the far side, and took off running. Her boots clanked on the metal catwalk as the distance flew by in a flash.
A hatch opened, and Taryn saw Tiraena slip out onto the roof. Taryn followed, a blaster bolt nearly embedding itself in her head. But she pushed on nonetheless, pulling herself up onto the roof with bravery that bordered on recklessness. Only a thin atmosphere protected by a weak forcefield, sheltered her from the vacuum of space. The biting cold, however, did little to cool her anger.
Tiraena was sprinting across the roof, heading for a Miy'til fighter hidden beneath a heavy canopy.
Using her acquired pole-arm as a pole-vault, Taryn levered herself through the air and slammed into the fleeing noble with every ounce of strength she had. Both of them tumbled across the rooftop before rolling off one and other and staring each other down.

"You've ruined everything," Tiraena said accusingly, her normally striking blue eyes turning all black for a fraction of a second. "We could have had Hapes! With the Queen demoralized, it would have been easy for us to take the throne! We could have started a chain-reaction that would forever cement the rule of House AlGray!"
"I don't give a damn!" Taryn yelled, tears streaming out of her eyes. "You killed my sister! Your own brother! Zekk! All for your stupid power games! I'll kill you! I swear it!"
Tiraena held out her hands, and two bony blades slid into them. "That is beyond your ability little girl. And even if you somehow do defeat us, you haven't changed anything. They're all still dead. House AlGray will still rule."
Taryn lashed out with her Krayt Dragon boot and knocked a knife free from Tiraena's hand. She caught the blade as it tumbled into the air and held it so that the blade-length paralleled her forearm. "We'll see."
The two Hapan women clashed in a rapid flurry. Kicks and punches interspersed with deadly lunges with knife in hand. They danced across the rooftop, flipping over ventilation shafts and power conduits.
But both were soon panting, however, as the thin atmosphere fast took its toll on both combatants. The initial explosion of action quickly devolved into measured and deliberate strikes and blows.
And then Tiraena gained the upper hand, delivering a devastating kick to one of Taryn's ankles, snapping the bone. When Taryn went down, Tiraena quickly took off for her fighter, scurrying across the rooftop like a cockroach seeking shelter.
Taryn, desperate to stop the woman, hurled her knife; but her angle was bad, and it flew over Tiraena's head. Taryn frantically cast about for anything that could help, and then saw her discarded pole-arm. Gritting her teeth, Taryn managed to crawl her way to it, gasping for air as she did. A hand wrapping around its handle, Taryn hastily looked back to where Tiraena was. The other woman was climbing into the cockpit of the fighter. Summoning every last ounce of strength, Taryn hurled the pole-arm at her foe.
The bladed weapon whistled as it sliced through the air and, just before the canopy of the Miy'til fighter could close, found its mark. A startled Tiraena let out a strangled sound as the pole-arm's blade hit her dead-center in the chest and pinned her into her seat. A hand twitched as it hit a button in the cockpit, and then, one more death rattle later, the noble woman slumped in the pilot's chair very much dead. Another second passed, and suddenly the fighter was engulfed in a fiery explosion as it ripped itself apart.

Taryn sagged back to the ground, a hoarse sensation in her throat and bitter taste on her tongue as the glowing remains of the fighter burned themselves into her mind.
The explosion echoed in her ears, but Taryn was numb to it.
Her sister was dead. Zedal was dead. So was Zekk. She desperately prayed that this was some kind of nightmare, that she hadn't just lost everyone she had ever cared for in a single night. She could still see their smiling faces in the back of her mind, hear their voices and the laughter they had shared. She closed her eyes, a strangled sob escaping her throat as her heart clenched painfully.
She could still hear blasterfire from the main room of the building below her, though it was significantly decreased in volume. Thoughts of the main room immediately took her to who she had left behind. She struggled to her feet, gasping in agony as she did. Pulling her crippled leg with her, she hobbled back to the hatch of the roof and awkwardly descended the ladder. By then, the blasterfire had completely stopped, and the barked out orders of her squad leader indicated that the Hapans had been the winners.
"Look! Up there!"
"Ancestors, it's Taryn!"
Somehow Taryn managed to summon the strength to make it back to the ground, where she was instantly mobbed by her squadmates. It was a good thing too, since she nearly collapsed the moment the first hand touched her.
"Where's the medic? Where's Irina?" A voice called out from her right.
"She's with Trista and the Jedi," another replied.
Taryn, slightly dazed, tilted her head towards that voice. "Why? Aren't they…dead?"
"Almost," a hand rubbed her back. "The AlGray man threw himself over your sister and kicked the detonator away, taking the brunt of that blast. He didn't make it, but because of that, your sister's in one piece. And the Jedi did some sort of Jedi trance to keep himself alive until Irina could get to him."
Taryn let out a small whimper, her eyes squeezing shut as the tears began to flow in earnest. "Trista, Zekk, they're alive?"
"They're alive," the voice of Moreem Espara confirmed softly, revealing herself to be the one supporting her on her left.
The last of Taryn's strength left her, and the world around her swam in her vision, and she finally blacked out.
(-(-(III)-)-)
Present day

Zekk supposed he should be angry with Alema. After all, who wouldn't be after finding themselves unclothed, beneath a copious amount of silken sheets, tied to a bed several times larger than he was, with a ysalamir innocently chomping on a few twigs on one's lap. Then again, in the bewildered state he had been in the previous night, very few things made sense to him at the moment.

There were the obvious questions he had. Why was Alema on Sapphire in the first place? Where had she been the past eight years?

And then there were the moral questions that developed from his fight with Taryn the previous night. Was he truly just avoiding the dark side of the Force so he didn't have to deal with it? Wasn't what he had learned at the Shadow Academy techniques of murderers and power-hungry maniacs? Could he truly use a lightsaber whose color brought back memories he was trying to forget?

As he lay in bed, with only the view of the brilliant gas giant outside the balcony window as comfort, the questions continued to circle about in his mind. In some ways, he was grateful for this chance to simply reflect on everything. To just take a moment to distance himself from the chaotic happenings of the galaxy.

Of course, he much rather be clothed and unbound for said moment.

Letting his head plop back down on the pillow, he stared up at the ceiling and thought about Taryn's words yet again. He had to admit that her words had shaken him. All these years and he *thought* he had had a handle on his experiences as a teenage dark-sider. Yet, now that he reflected on it, some of what she said had made sense. His mind drifted to the fights he had had with Jaina during the Yuuzhan Vong War, one of the primary reasons why his friendship with her had been torpedoed. His arguments about her brothers going to the dark side, about how revenge wasn't the answer, echoed hollowly in the spin Taryn had put on them.

Was it really possible to use the abilities he had learned at the Shadow Academy for *good*? Was it the dark side if he used lightning and his anger to protect? Zekk's first instinct was to shut down that train of thought. After all, practically every Jedi Master he knew would immediately say that those thoughts led to the dark side. That overconfidence, pride, underestimating the allure of the dark side was a sure way to 'fall' or 'relapse'. His new saber was just a saber, however. Despite its color, it had yet to do anything, to be defined in any way. Was he truly going to fear his new lightsaber just because of what its color symbolized?

With a frustrated grunt, Zekk experimentally tugged at the binders Alema had clapped around his wrists. Like the last several tries, the

metal cuffs didn't give. Wherever Alema had been, she at least hadn't lost her warped sense of humor or penchant for mischief.
Glancing at the bedside clock, Zekk noted that it was just after the standard Hapan breakfast time. His stomach growled at that thought, and he rolled his eyes. Great, now even his stomach had joined the rebellion his mind and heart were leading.
Fortunately, he didn't have to wait much longer. The doors to his room were pushed open with authority, his name shouted with some sense of urgency. Taryn was the first one into the room, the tension in her body visibly easing when her eyes settled on him. Trista was next through, her pace, however, was much more sedate. And third through was a smirking Alema Rar, her eyes green once more and sparkling with glee.
For some reason, that was almost as scary as the deadly glare Taryn shot in Alema's direction.
"I told you he was fine," Alema said airily. She gestured to Zekk's sheet-covered body. "The codes to those stun-cuffs are mixed up somewhere in the sheets. I was kind of in a rush to get to you people after seeing the message you left Zekky there."
Taryn took a step towards the bed, but then paused when she realized Zekk's position. Heat immediately filled her cheeks and she hurriedly yanked her hand back as if they had been burned. Eyes darted to the side as her entire face flushed.
"I could always get them for you if you want," Alema sauntered to Zekk's bedside. "I believe I left it somewhere around the lower half of the bed."
At the Twi'lek's proximity to Zekk, Taryn's head immediately snapped back around, her death-glare returning. Off to the side, Trista simply shook her head, sighing and pleading with an imaginary power to make her sister less predictable.
"Errr…Taryn," Zekk stuttered as Taryn promptly climbed onto the very large bed and began feeling around for the code cylinder.
"Shut up," Taryn grumbled, unable to meet his eyes.
Alema retreated back to the exit of the room, her arms folded smugly in front of her. Trista, seeing that the only person in the room in any danger was the Twi'lek, made her way to the door.
"I'll let Captain Espara know the two of you will be with the rest of us in a moment," Trista sighed aloud. She rotated towards the smirking Twi'lek. "And Alema, please stop baiting my sister. It's embarrassing."
In a stage whisper, keeping one eye on the blushing Taryn's futile search, Alema replied. "I could have just told her to stun the ysalamir so Zekk could free himself, but I figured she'd have more fun this way."

Trista stared at Alema in disbelief. "It'll be a miracle if you could accomplish what two years of ineffectual flirting between the two of them couldn't."
"That's me, Alema Rar the miracle worker," Alema grinned toothily. "I never told you that Zekky and I go way back? It's great to finally see him settle on someone, even if she is a bit young."
Trista's eyes narrowed. "*Is* there a code cylinder under the sheets?"
"Nope," Alema chuckled, looking all too pleased with herself. She reached into her black leather vest and pulled out the aforementioned cylinder, placing it on the chair by the door. "Zekk's perfectly capable of telling Taryn to stun the ysalamir himself."
Trista glanced back to where her twin was still feeling around the very large bed and five layers of sheets. Shaking her head one last time, she amended her previous statement. "Join the rest of us when you can, Taryn, Zekk. I'm sure Captain Espara will be very understanding."
"I'll go with you," Alema said perkily. "After all, now that your other half knows Zekk really is alive, she doesn't have to follow through with that death threat."
The two left the room, closing the door behind them. The moment they did, Taryn halted her actions and knelt on the bed by Zekk's side. An awkward silence stretched on, with Taryn mirroring Zekk's scrutiny of the distant gas giant outside the balcony.
"I'm sorry," Zekk and Taryn said in unison.
They both blinked; startled, and they turned back to each other.
"You were right," they again said together.
This evoked weak chuckles from the both of them.
Taryn stretched herself out over the covers on the bed beside Zekk, seemingly in no hurry to find the code cylinder or release him.
"Taryn," Zekk raised his eyebrows and used his head to motion towards the binders.
Taryn, however, wasn't looking. She had rested her head on his chest, idly playing with the silken material of the sheets. "I didn't realize how…dangerous the dark side of the Force was. How much strength is needed to pull away from it."
Zekk closed his eyes, exhaled slowly, and did his best not to groan in exasperation. "Do I want to know what Alema did?"
Taryn emitted a small laugh against him. "Gave us a crash course in how futile it would be to go up against a fully trained dark Jedi. She beat us up, tossed us about, had us beat each other up, had us doubt each other to the point where we couldn't even look at one and other when the lesson was over. When she held five of us in that Force choke

thing, it was clear she could have killed all of us without even breaking a sweat."
"Oh." Zekk felt his stomach churn violently at the thought of Taryn and Trista being subjected to dark side abilities.
As if sensing this, Taryn just gave him a small hug. "It's okay, it might have been worse than the training Trista and I went through to become Royal Guards, but it's nothing we can't handle."
"Taryn," Zekk was at a loss for words.
"She said she killed you, you know," Taryn continued on, hugging him just a bit tighter. "Said you had been distracted by our fight last night and she cut off your head. She came into the room holding your lightsaber."
Zekk grimaced, once again questioning the sanity of the Twi'lek. "Well, I'm very much alive. Just slightly inconvenienced at the moment."
"She made each of us relive some of our worst memories," Taryn murmured. "I relived *that* day on this stupid moon. The day I thought I lost everyone I ever loved. I felt the same emotions, the horror, the terror. When I came out of it, Trista was holding me, telling me over and over that Alema hadn't killed you, that she and you were still alive. I nearly broke down crying. She's scary, your friend. I don't even know if she's on our side, but the squad definitely learned a lot about fighting Force users. I'm sorry for lecturing you last night. I…"
"Taryn, you weren't all wrong," Zekk interrupted, closing his eyes. Even without the Force, he could somehow feel the red-haired warrior girl on a level that was much more than just her physical presence against him. "You were right. Just because the techniques I learned have a bigger potential to be used for evil, doesn't mean they can't be used for good too. Sure, I'll probably only use them as a last resort, but not using an ability that can save lives or right a wrong is an even greater crime."
"So long as you stay you," Taryn mumbled. "Alema showed us all what the dark side can do to a person. Showed us all just how badly it had damaged her body and mind. Showed how badly it can damage someone else. Despite what Trista said, I don't think any of us are in any shape to do much investigating today."
Zekk was torn between cursing Alema and thanking her. On one hand, he knew that he never would have been able to use the techniques she had on the squad of Hapans. He loathed using the dark side, especially if it was on those he considered friends—family even. Alema had given them a far more thorough lesson than he could have ever done. Maybe too far.

Once again frustrated by the ysalamir innocently munching twigs on his lap, he tilted his head down to plant a soft kiss atop Taryn's head. "Hey Taryn. Can you use your blaster to stun the ysalamir? I might be able to help once I can feel the Force again."
Taryn blinked slowly, and almost lethargically drew her blaster and stunned the Force-negating creature. With a small groan of relief, Zekk undid the stun cuffs and wrapped an arm around Taryn. He placed the palm of his other hand against her forehead and concentrated.
After a moment, Taryn quivered in his arms; the fire returned to her gray eyes. She took a shuddering breath, her own eyes falling close as a look of wonder flickered across her face. "What are you doing?"
"Alema used one of the more basic attacks of a dark Jedi," Zekk said, his free hand gently running through her dark red hair. "It's based in fear, in doubt, the goal to demoralize and immobilize your enemy by overwhelming their mind with pretty much every negative thing they've ever experienced. I'm just doing the reverse."
"I can see my mom, hear her voice," Taryn whispered hoarsely, hugging herself to Zekk even tighter. "And dad, telling me that he loves me. My times with Trista when we were kids. Meeting you for the first time, and then again on Tatooine. And my time with Zedal… helping you build your lightsaber."
"Like I said," Zekk said, a smile in his voice. "The only way to cancel out the affects of horror overload is to balance it out with the good."
Taryn opened her eyes, the vulnerability in her expression clear.
"Better now?" Zekk said tenderly, the pad of his thumb tracing the outline of her cheek and wiping away the single tear that had fallen.
Taryn's response was to lean forward and plant a very chaste, yet loving kiss on Zekk's cheek, her eyes sparkling. "Better."
She slid out of bed, grabbing his hand. "Come on. Let's go to the others. Trista won't say it, but I think Alema really did a number on her too."
"Taryn…wait…" Zekk struggled to keep himself in bed.
"Wait, what? Don't you want to help my sister?" Taryn spun back around, throwing back the sheets energetically. The moment she did, she froze, eyes growing round. She had evidently forgotten his current state of dress. "Oh…."
"Yeah," Zekk muttered, heat rushing to his cheeks as he struggled to cover himself.
Taryn didn't even bother to keep her gaze rooted on his face, even if the color of her own face nearly matched that of her hair. "Why is it that every adventure we have, you end up either shirtless or naked? Like that time we chased the assassins into the Rancor playpen and

the Rancor swiped your shirt. Or the time before that, during the jungle hunt for another assassin, when the sap of one of the plants ate away all the woolen fibers of your robes. Or even back on Denon, you lost your clothes twice in one day!"
"Good question," Zekk pulled the sheets around him in an impromptu garb. He walked over to his dresser and began to pull on a fresh set of clothing. "Will of the Force I guess."
Not even looking away, Taryn continued their banter. "What? The Force wants you in varying states of undress to satisfy some unconscious desire of every woman you come across?"
"Taryn," Zekk paused after looking over his shoulder and seeing that Taryn was watching. With a raised eyebrow, he rotated a finger to gesture for her to turn around. He only continued speaking when she rolled her eyes and complied. "As powerful a Jedi as you think I am, I only know about a minuet fraction of the entire Force."
"Well, so long as the Force has a sense to make you in those varying states of undress only around Trista and I, I couldn't care less." Taryn tilted her head back and called out to the room. "Hear that great and powerful Force? He's ours, so no making him naked in front of other women!"
Zekk's head fell forward and boinked off the wooden doors of the dresser. "Taryn."
"Yeah?" Taryn raised an eyebrow challengingly.
"Let's just go meet up with the others." Zekk sighed. As he did though, the corners of his mouth twitched as he fought a smile. Yup, Taryn was definitely better. And he wouldn't have her any other way.
He nearly froze in place at that thought. Did he 'have' her? While walking down the hallway of the Sapphire Palace, Zekk sneaked a glance at the vibrant younger woman at his side. True, she was definitely amazing. Determined was another word he could use to describe her. She didn't make her feelings for him any secret, but at the same time, he didn't want to take advantage of that. He knew that both Trista and Taryn felt that they had some type of 'debt' they owed him for his actions 'on behalf of House Zel.' He also knew that Taryn had latched onto him because he was 'safe,' didn't come with any of the complications a Hapan suitor might have. But did he truly belong on Hapes? Did he really deserve someone as great as she was?
Yes
Alema, stay out of my head.
I'm just saying.
Alema!
Alright, going. Geez.

Zekk shook his head and smiled wryly. Spying the red-head looking at him with concern, he draped an arm around Taryn's shoulder and gave her an affectionate squeeze. She hip-checked him back in response and they resumed their trek through the palace.

(-(-(IV)-)-)

The rest of the day, however, failed to be as enjoyable. Evidence of doctored footage, coached versions of events, and plain deceit made it a very trying time. The team was able to piece together what had occurred in the moons of Relephon by focusing solely on what the 'eye-witnesses' and evidence *didn't* say or show. Of course, that in itself wasn't the proof they needed, and they became even more determined to hunt down the truth.

The rest of the week passed in a similar fashion. Mornings were spent with Alema and Zekk teaching the team how to best survive an encounter with a Force-user bent on obliterating them, the rest of the day was spent scouring the Relephon Moons and the accompanying battlefield debris field. The AlGray Ducha was nowhere to be seen in this time, letting her underlings answer any of the questions or direct the team to the appropriate resource.

Finally, as the week neared an end with no satisfactory results, Moreem called Zekk in for a meeting in her quarters.

"You can use your Force to find people, right?" Moreem said succinctly.

"Yes," Zekk confirmed.

"Then try and see where the Ducha has disappeared to. I highly doubt she'd spend the entire week 'indisposed,' for an investigation as important as this; even if she does blame Taryn, Trista, and the squad for the deaths of her children. But I need you to find her and get *her* version of events, straight from her mouth. Use the Force to coax the truth out of her if need be."

"Is there any particular reason why?" Zekk asked mildly. He could sense what Moreem had in mind, and he was slightly shocked that the dark-haired commando would so eagerly embrace some of the tactics Alema had been using on them.

"This evening Corporal Roh managed to break AlGray's communications' ciphers. She detected a seemingly non-stop communication link between this moon and locations within the Transitory Mists. The thing is, these transmissions don't appear to be the standard holocom, hypercomm, or hyperwave sort. We've never seen this type of communication before, so it's highly likely something the Corellians are using. Maybe some sort of advanced tech that keeps us from tracing it back to its source."

"And you believe the Ducha is communicating the progress of the investigation to the Corellians?"
"Yes," Moreem said. "Now I know Trista and Taryn will object to it, but this has to be strictly off-record. A task performed solely by you and Alema Rar. House politics say that the Ducha is an ally of the throne. Any second guessing or public investigation into her loyalty by the Royal Guard will have negative repercussions for multiple parties, including some of the families of the people in my squad."
"You want the opportunity to deny that you've ever issued this order."
"This is new ground, Zekk," Moreem grimaced. "Hapes has always handled her coups and house intrigue in-house. The addition of the Corellians and Bothans as a result of the Queen Mother's vigorous attempts to open the Consortium to outsiders is a game changer. The interference occurring has never been seen at such levels and we want to tread on this new ground as carefully as possible. If things go wrong, we can point to the Jedi Order and say that you were operating without our consent. If my suspicions are right, however, then we will have uncovered the greatest threat to the throne since Ta'a Chume tried to assassinate the previous Queen Mother."
"Say Temperess AlGray is in league with the Corellians," Zekk broached. "I highly doubt she'd be acting alone. If she's exposed, there's no avoiding a Hapan civil war. Well, maybe 'civil war' isn't the right term. Is the Royal Navy ready to take on usurpers backed by Corellian warships?"
Moreem stared at Zekk levelly. "You're assuming we'd allow the information that the Ducha is a traitor to become public knowledge. If she is, the only people who will know about the truth are you, me, and Alema."
"Jedi aren't assassins," Zekk said warningly.
"I'll be pulling the trigger. All you have to do is confirm the facts," Moreem said coldly. "We're protecting the Queen Mother and the *chume'da*, Zekk. We act accordingly when taking out any threat to them.
"How will you explain the Temperess' passing? It's no secret that this team has been here investigating the skirmish."
"Her death will be a tragic accident," Moreem answered. "Very few people have seen her these past five days. And before that, even her own staff says that Temperess had become a bit of an eccentric recluse. If she does have allies helping her plot a coup, they won't be none-the-wiser. When we return to Hapes with nothing to report, they'll assume the same about her death and continue to go about their plans. If you're lucky, Zekk, perhaps you can even get her to tell you

about these allies, should they exist. In the meantime, the rest of the squad will begin to wrap up our investigations. You have until tomorrow night to extract as much information as you can."
Zekk raised an eyebrow. "You may be a Royal Guard, Moreem, but I'm still a Jedi."
"Then have Alema do the interrogation," Moreem said, matching Zekk's frosty expression. "When the fate of the Consortium is at stake. When a war that will tear it apart is only a couple bad steps away. We don't have the luxury of scruples."
"And when you start resorting to the tactics of your enemy. If you call someone a savage, yet do the same as they, what does that make you?"
"It's not their actions I would care about, it's their reasoning," Moreem replied challengingly. "The Ducha knows something. Is hiding something. The sooner we learn what that is, the sooner this latest crisis can be averted. I wouldn't ask you to do this if I had another choice, Zekk. And being a Jedi, you don't *have to* follow my orders. But the only other option is that I use advanced life-detecting equipment and storm whatever bunker the Ducha is hiding in with the nine others I have with me. This mission is best carried out with a scalpel, not an axe-blade; but an axe-blade can do the job all the same."
Zekk released a very long breath, unable to shake the feeling of doubt climbing up his throat and twisting his stomach. At the same time, he couldn't deny Moreem's reasoning. The longer they took, meant more time for Tenel Ka's enemies to gather their own strength. He'd be damned if Allana or Tenel Ka was hurt, especially after promising Jacen he'd look out for them.
"Fine," Zekk said curtly.
"So how does a Jedi locate a missing noblewoman?"
"Are you sure she's still on this moon?"
"Yes."
"Then I'll need a holomap of Sapphire, and several uninterrupted hours of peace," Zekk replied. "It would have helped if I knew Temperess AlGray better, but I'll have to make do with what I remember feeling from her children."
"Several hours?" Moreem used her quarter's holo-emitter to cover the floor in a large-scale representation of the moon.
Zekk regarded Moreem evenly. "I can't just snap my fingers and pull a location out of thin air. What I'll be doing is scouring this planet with the Force to look for anything that stands out. Even then, I'll only have a vague sense of where I should go once I've 'located' her."

"Then I'll leave you to it, Zekk. I'll try to keep Taryn and Trista occupied with some orders that contain no loopholes. The last thing I want is their creative interpretations of my commands to lead to a major diplomatic incident."
Zekk nodded once and took a seat in the center of the map, right where the Sapphire Palace was indicated. "Good luck."
"Shouldn't I be telling that to you?"
(-(-(V)-)-)
The blue light of Relephon was fast fading as the gas giant once again orbited in front of the system's brilliant sun. And with the disappearance of the light came a rapid drop in temperature. Shadows quickly advanced across the rocky gray soil of the moon. Most of the moisture in the air froze into sparkling crystals of ice held up by the thin gravity, creating a beautiful curtain of prisms that refracted the light of the Transitory Mists above.
"If I weren't freezing my lekku off, I might enjoy a place like this," Alema muttered through her breath mask.
"Dark, gloomy, and full of dangerous intrigue?"
"You say dangerous, I say fun," Alema quipped, digging her hiking stick into the rocky ground.
"Alema, anything life-threatening is fun to you," Zekk said wryly. He took a small break from his trek, straightening and adjusting the hood of his very warm winter-coat.
Turning his head, he gazed back at the way they had come. The view behind them was breath-taking. They were high up in one of the undulating mountain ranges that circumnavigated Sapphire. So high up that they needed oxygen tanks to continue to breath. The crystalline curtain of frozen moisture caused everything beneath it to shimmer in a surreal way, as if the valley and all that it contained were merely figments of their imagination. At some angles, the curtain of ice-crystals looked almost like solid pools of water, reflecting the sparkling sky and swirling gas giant above.
"Not true," Alema protested. "Trying some people's cooking is *very* life-threatening, but definitely *not* fun."
Zekk acknowledged her comment with a nod, and reached out through the Force to gain his bearings. "We should be nearing the mining village I saw on the map. A half-klick more in the direction we're heading."
"And from there, a spooky depleted durelium mine," Alema sighed. "I never get to go anywhere nice."
"Blame the insane bad guys," Zekk commented with a smile. They resumed their trek, their heavy boots crunching the gravel beneath

them. "It's not my fault they make their bases in places like abandon mines."
"Or abandoned asteroids or tombs," Alema added. "Or run-down warehouses, overgrown abandoned labs, creepy planets."
"Some of them have style," Zekk pointed out.
"Yeah, but those guys are always taken out before we can get to them. I mean, having a glitzy mansion, a private island, or some ancient fortress is great and all, but they're like magnets to all those aspiring heroes out there."
"Sooo, you want the next bad guy to have a hidden mansion on a tropical planet?"
"Exactly!" Alema nodded. "Maybe have some waiter droids waiting with free un-poisoned drinks before we start blasting the place apart."
"Keep dreaming, Alema."
"Will do," Alema mock-saluted.
The trail continued upwards between two peaks, but it was also leveling out.
"So," Alema started, glancing slyly at Zekk. "You and the red-head, huh?"
"There is no 'me and Taryn,'" Zekk grumbled.
"Oh? You're with her sister then? Does she know? The only other red-head I know is… Alema gasped playfully. "Is *that* why you stayed behind? Does Jacen know? Are you sure Allana's his?"
"Alema," Zekk groaned.
"What? I've been a way for a while. It's nice to know that all my old friends are happy and with someone who cares for them."
There was an odd seriousness in Alema's voice that cut short Zekk's defensive retort. "Me and Taryn…it's complicated."
"Zekk, every relationship with you is complicated," Alema said flatly. "I hope you aren't passing up this chance to be happy, just because you're being nobly thick-headed."
"Blunt as always."
"Only when it comes to my friends," Alema said. "Look, that girl's crazy for you. You know that, I know that, all of Hapes knows that. Well maybe not *all* of Hapes, but you get the idea."
"I just…I just don't want to rush anything," Zekk finally sighed. "She and Trista have been good friends to me. And for the first time in a very long while, I can see myself actually settling on Hapes. Actually have a place to call home."
"You're scared," Alema said, there was no teasing in her voice. Her expression was almost pitying as she reached out and lightly shoved Zekk. "Scared of losing what you have a chance at having."

Zekk emitted a weak laugh. "Yeah, strange is it? I've spent most my life looking for some place to belong. The Shadow Academy, the Jedi Academy, at Jaina's side, as a servant of the Galactic Alliance, I've always been drifting to one group or another, hoping to find that one place that felt right. And now that I've actually found that one place…if I screw things up somehow, if I…"
"Zekk."
"Yeah?"
"Shut up, stop thinking about it, and just do it," Alema advised. "You only have one shot at life, as short as it is. Who cares if we rejoin the Force afterwards, we won't be 'living'. One shot, no second guessing. When we get back from this mission, you are going to walk up to Taryn and kiss her in front of the rest of the squadron, got me?"
"Alema…"
"You're either kissing her or telling her that things won't work out between the two of you," Alema said coolly. "I've met several nice Hapans during my stay over here. I'm sure they'll be eager to have a chance at Taryn's heart. So this is your chance Zekk, the deadline you've been looking for. Act or no."
Zekk let out a very long breath, fogging up his breath-mask in the process. He was too lost in thought to be embarrassed. "Why the rush, Alema? Why are you trying so hard to get me and Taryn together?"
At that, Alema's face looked much more haunted than Zekk had ever seen. "I…times like this, relative peace and quiet. Times where you can look across from you and see your friends, family, those you care for, smiling and healthy…Don't take them for granted, Zekk. Please. Like I said, I consider you one of my friends, and if this galaxy really does fracture again, I want to be able to be on the other side of the galaxy and know that at least one capable person is looking out for you."
Zekk stared at Alema in shock, feeling a myriad of emotions pouring out of normally tightly controlled barriers. Alema's eyes were startlingly green and full of tears as she smiled weakly at him. The Twi'lek bowed her head, her lekku continuing to twitch in the non-verbal communication her species was known for.
"All right," Zekk breathed softly. "All right. When we find Temperess and bring her back, I'll go talk with Taryn."
"Thank you," Alema said hoarsely.
"Are you okay?"
"No," Alema chuckled. She began walking again. "Not remotely. But there's nothing you can do about it Zekk. Sorry for worrying you."
"Alema."
"Yeah?"

"I'll have Taryn watching out for me. But what about you?"
Alema glanced over her shoulder. "Would you believe if I said that the Force-ghost of one of Vader's dead apprentices checks in on me from time to time?"
"And no one else?"
"I'm selfishly trying to recruit Jysella Horn," Alema shrugged. "I've been in over my head for seven years, seven years too many, and I'm surprised that I haven't completely broken yet. Probably part of the reason why I decided to take a break from my full-time job of having fun."
"Then let me help too."
Alema's smile became wry and mischievous once more. "Sorry Zekky, no can do. You have a nice red-head to start a life with, a home to make on Hapes. Not going to wreck that. Remember what I've been telling her and her squad every morning? It's okay if a dark Jedi breaks them, so long as they control just *how* they break. Sometimes, if done right, the broken shards of someone can be more deadly than the whole."
"I'm correct in assuming you won't be returning to the Jedi Order any time soon?"
"Yeah," Alema nodded, her shoulders slumping slightly. "That's not my place in this galaxy. Still looking for it. You can relate, right?"
Zekk nodded silently.
"I'll find it eventually," Alema continued on. "Just like you've found yours."
"I wish you the best of luck then," Zekk said gently. "You know my holo-frequency if you ever do need my help."
"Thanks," Alema murmured.
The two emerged over the crest of a rocky outcropping and saw the small mining settlement nestled in a terrace between two mountain peaks. The settlement was a collection of dust-covered pre-fab shelters and mining equipment, with a couple of broken-down ships converted into living quarters and public space thrown in for flavor.
"Well, we're here," Zekk scanned the region.
"Shouldn't there be people in the village?" Alema gestured. "I mean, the report I read said that it was the mine that was abandoned, not the village."
"I read the same report," Zekk began walking cautiously towards the perimeter of the village. The Force was telling him that some form of life was in the village. Just not Hapan. Well, not solely Hapan. He didn't know what to make of what he was sensing. "Strange, everyone is at peace, yet everything feels off at the same time."

"Good, I thought it was just me," Alema said, a hand sliding to her yorik coral and lambent lightsaber. "Should peace ever feel this wrong? I mean, there's no conflict. No strife of any type. Not even a family dispute or grudge against a neighbor. Just…peace."
They continued their slow and wary approach, seeing and sensing no threat, yet feeling their skin crawl at the same time. A pre-fab shelter passed by them on the left, the glazed window offering them a distorted view of a family sitting down for their evening meal. Even then, something was off about the almost robotic way the silhouettes were moving. A cool breeze swept through the village, stirring up small swirls of dust and causing several metal cables of a mining machine to clack together; the only sound the two Jedi had heard thus far.
"Town hall is right there," Alema pointed to a building that had once been the back half of an ore-freighter.
"If that's the town hall, these people haven't needed to use it in a very long time," Zekk murmured, eying the dust-caked and rusted structure. One of the front doors had half-fallen off, and the ground around the building was undisturbed to the point where a meter-high pile of dirt surrounded it on all sides.
"Something is really not right here," Alema breathed, looking up and down the nearest streets.
"Are you here to Join us?" A voice suddenly startled the two Jedi, causing them to jump and whirl around in shock.
They were drawn up short by the sight of a young child, who couldn't have been more than ten years of age. He was human in appearance, but his eyes were completely covered in black film.
"Join you?" Alema raised an eyebrow.
"Yes," the child intoned in the same monotone. "To know the peace of the Kind and become a greater part of this galaxy. Please, Join us."
"Join us," another voice added without emotion, a teenager swayed as she emerged from her pre-fab shelter, eyes as black as the younger boy's.
"Join us," a third said.
More villagers began to emerge. "Know the peace that comes with Joining the Colony."
"You will have no fears, no worries, your burdens will be shared by trillions."
"No fears."
"No worries."
"Join us."
Backing up slowly, Alema and Zekk shared a bewildered look. "What the kriff is going on?" Alema hissed.

"I…I don't know," Zekk shook his head as a powerful Force presence began pressing on his mind. "Taryn, Trista, and I encountered people afflicted with a similar plight back on Denon. We even became a part of this 'Colony' for a few moments."
"Wait a minute, I thought the Colony was a criminal syndicate that stretches from one side of the galaxy to the next."
"I did too," Zekk shook his head again, blinking rapidly as he tried to clear it. At the same time, the villagers began to close in all around them, continuing their entreating calls without a single hint of emotion.
"If the Ducha is near here, do you think she's ended up like…" Alema paused, likewise feeling a pressure on her head. "Okay, stupid question. Let's get out of here."
Zekk nodded, stumbling forward as he tried to force his legs to move. When the crowd began to bar their path, Alema ignited her lightsaber.
"No, Alema," Zekk hissed. "They aren't themselves, you just can't go and kill them."
"I was only going to cut off their legs," Alema grumbled. She shuddered as the powerfully insidious Force-presence redoubled its attack on her mind. "At this rate, we're not going to be able to get out of this place. We should just... just…Join."
Zekk could barely focus on her words, his world beginning to swim in his eyes. Alema seemed to succumb as well. Only vaguely aware of their surroundings, the two Jedi were carried by the crowd of villagers towards the nearby mine entrance. The dark passageways all seemed the same as they were taken deeper and deeper into the depleted mine, descending further and further into the mountainside. Not that either were in any shape to appreciate the stalagmites and stalactites they were brought past. Finally, they were brought out into a main chamber of sorts.
There, towering conical mounds of dirt stretched up high, seemingly to the height of the mountain itself. More villagers were there to greet them, though some immediately returned to adding to a new mound. Clicking and clacking sounds began to increase as Alema and Zekk were brought closer and closer. What sounded like thousands of bugs scampering to and fro echoed from all corners of the chamber, but not a single insect could be seen.
Alema and Zekk were half-dragged into one of the taller conical structures, through narrow corridors, and finally to a spacious room. Awaiting them on a single throne of some sort of cartilage was a lone bipedal figure. On one side of the throne was what looked suspiciously like a black Ssi-ruu, and the other a young human woman dressed solely in carapace-looking material.

The figure on the throne appeared human, but her face was half covered in an insect-like carapace. Bug-like limbs stuck out from her back, and her face was deformed beyond any recognition. Seeing the two Jedi, however, her face cracked into a twisted smile and she rose from her chair.
"Jedi Knight Zekk, Jedi Exile Alema Rar. We welcome you to the Prime Chamber of Aebea. We have fond memories of the two of you, and your abilities will greatly advance the plans of the Colony."
"Who are you?" Zekk managed weakly, the Force presence bombarding his head felt like millions of minds trying to tear his own in millions of different directions.
"We are the Prime Aebea, AebeaLomi of the Joiners. We long forward to your Joining."
(-(-(Chapter End)-)-)

Anakin
(-(-(I)-)-)
The steady hum emitted by the dovin basal was the only sound that accompanied Anakin as he reflected on the past few hours. In the *Veila* once more, he and his family were now headed to the capital of the Galactic Alliance. Cassa was currently curled up against his chest, fast asleep, his wife in their quarters with their youngest, his older brother in the cockpit of the ship communicating with the sentient vessel, and Jacen's apprentices were asleep in the guest quarters of the vessel.
In a not so surprising twist, after Jedis'sei met Jedi Master Rachi Sitra, the younger Twi'lek decided to stay on Ossus. Jedis'sei had been ecstatic about meeting another one of her people who could use the Force, and was openly in awe of Rachi's wisdom and strength. Of course Rachi, being the kind-hearted Jedi archaeologist that she was, immediately 'adopted' the younger Twi'lek, and the two were getting along just swimmingly. In hindsight, Jedis'sei decision to stay behind was probably a more preferable choice.
Anakin's proposal to separate the Jedi from the Galactic Alliance had gone as well as he had expected. Pretty much the entire High Council, Jedi and non-Jedi, were opposed to the idea. Though some of the Jedi, such as Jaden, Kam, and Octa were open to having the Jedi cede power provided there was a framework to do so, the non-Jedi members, Tresina, and Kirana were wary of any upheaval during the already turbulent times the galaxy was going through. Unlike before, it was clear that his proposal would be a definite uphill battle on many fronts. Added to the fact that he had returned to a galaxy so drastically

different than when he had left, and he often felt that he was blindly groping around in the dark for a solution.
Here he was again, trying to provide answers as fast as he could as everyone lobbed questions at him. He only hoped that he hadn't misread the situation, that what both he and Jacen had seen from the data had been actual, and not a product of their fevered minds trying to make sense of everything. Then again, if it wasn't what they thought it was, they had just placed everyone they knew in grave danger. It wasn't like Anakin could relay any of these doubts to anyone. The second they saw him waver, the sense of hope that had blossomed would die away in an instant.
He absently rubbed Cassa's back as he once again began reorganizing all the intricate puzzle pieces that made up his problem. One of the reasons why they were going to Denon was so that he and Jacen could have face-to-face talks with the various politically important people involved. Senators, ministers, various lobby groups, if the Jedi were to cede control without the mass chaos feared by a majority of the High Council, an infrastructure needed to be in place to pick up the burden. Of course, rearranging a government was definitely not a fun job regardless of whether things were going your way, and Anakin definitely had a new appreciation of his uncle and aunt's efforts when they dissolved the New Republic and created the Galactic Alliance.
Another reason to go to Denon was that Leia had decided to run for Chief of State in hopes of accelerating the Jedi Order's departure from power. The elections were still almost nine galactic months away, yet there was much to be done. His mother was on the *Falcon,* in constant contact with the necessary parties as she hastily built a platform from which she could run on. She would be the 'anti-Omas,' taking the stance that it was time for the galaxy to stand up for itself and not wait to be rescued. Already several senators pledged to support her campaign, as well as several important corporate conglomerates with many systems in their pocket. It would be a drudgery, getting her elected, but at the moment, it seemed like her election would work out as well. Though they had yet to be informed, it was doubtful that Cal Omas would run against Leia in the upcoming elections.
"Stop thinking so loudly, daddy," Cassa complained, trying to burrow herself deeper against his chest.
"Sorry, Cas," Anakin planted a kiss atop her head. "You sure you didn't want to stay with your great uncle and auntie back on Ossus with Jedis'sei?"
"The *Veila*'s my home, you're my daddy, why would I want to do that?"

Anakin just chuckled wryly, continuing to run a hand through his daughter's curly blond hair. "Good question. *Veila*, what's our ETA to Denon?"
"*One more hour and twenty minutes,"* the *Veila* chimed over the intercom.
"Thanks." Anakin stood, carrying with him his limpet of a daughter. Continuing to wrap her in a protective layer of his Force energy, he made his way through the ship and to the sleeping quarters. There, he gently lay the blond girl down next to Tahiri.
Tahiri stirred from her nap, pulling Cassa close to her as she did. "Going to talk with Jacen?"
"Heading there now," Anakin nodded, kissing his wife and gently running a hand over Jayce's sleeping form. "We'll be at Denon in about an hour."
"'Kay, love you."
"Love you too," Anakin smiled faintly. He left his family to their sleep and sought out his older brother.
Jacen was attached to the cockpit cognition hood, obviously in deep thought with the vessel. Upon Anakin's approach, however, Jacen removed the hood and grinned lopsidedly at his little brother. "Hey Anakin. Don't think I was ever going to say this but, amazing ship you've raised."
Anakin laughed once, patting the hull of the hybrid vessel. "The *Veila's* definitely amazing. A big part of my family."
The two brothers could literally feel the pride and happiness emanate from the living ship, and Jacen once again shook his head in disbelief. "The *Veila* has a pretty good grasp at philosophical topics and can adapt pretty fast."
"You're having philosophical discussions with my ship?" Anakin raised an eyebrow.
Jacen laughed in turn. "Yup, interesting viewpoints, even willing to humor me on a few points I've made."
"The *Veila*'s still growing, learning," Anakin took a seat in the co-pilot's chair. "She spent a good portion of her time on Zonama just communicating with Sekot and the other wildlife there. I think that's helped her to keep an 'open mind' so to speak."
"Being the only sentient ship in the galaxy's probably added a different spin on things. A living, hybrid, vessel, wow," Jacen stroked the control cluster fondly. "And here I thought *I* was crazy for keeping that baby Rancor Teneniel got me."
"Jacen, hate to break it to you. You're still crazy," Anakin deadpanned. "At least my ship has a functional use."

"Hey, Cuddles has a functional use."
Anakin looked blankly at his brother. "You named the Rancor 'Cuddles'?"
"That's beside the point," Jacen waved a hand dismissively. "You should have been there when Zekk and Tenel Ka's security team chased that group of assassins into his playpen."
"You gave a Rancor a playpen?"
"Of course, he's only a baby," Jacen blinked as if that made perfect sense. "Anyways, those assassins took one look at Cuddles and decided to beg Zekk and the others for mercy. See, he prevented needless death and helped to protect the Queen Mother. Functional use."
Anakin, sensing mischief in his brother's words, just hung his head in surrender. "Whatever you say, Jace. Don't ever change."
Jacen smirked at his younger brother, reaching over to lightly nudge him. "You too, Anakin."
The two brothers lapsed into a comfortable silence, watching the blue tunnel of hyperspace through the cockpit windows.
"Do you really think this will work?" Anakin finally breathed. "That I didn't just come up with a crazy plan because it sounded good in my head?"
"Anakin, I hate to break it to you, but it *is* a crazy plan," Jacen replied with a touch of sarcasm. "What else would you call a plan that calls for the legitimate revamp a galactic government and the cessation of the Jedi Order from galactic affairs? Don't worry though, little brother. If things go sideways, we'll *both* be in trouble."
"Thanks," Anakin murmured, letting his head touch the back of his chair. "You know I have as much political sensitivity as a starving Hutt at a buffet. After the ball gets rolling, I'm going to be counting on you to keep it that way."
"Not a problem."
"I'll get allies for Hapes, Jacen," Anakin said solemnly.
"I know, Anakin. When you set your mind to do something, most of the time things get done," Jacen leaned back in his chair. "Besides, Allana and Tenel Ka have Zekk and a whole unit of elite soldiers looking after them. And despite being a Queen Mother, Tenel Ka can still hold her own in a fight. I just have to trust that they can last as long as we need them to."
Despite Jacen's words, Anakin could easily feel the doubt and self-inflicted guilt escape his brother's tightly controlled emotional shields. Anakin could just as easily imagine himself in Jacen's position, forced

to leave Tahiri, Cassa, and Jayce behind in a part of the galaxy seconds away from a full-scale war.
But unlike their childhood days, this wasn't a problem neither he nor Jacen could solve by tackling it head-on. No amount of lightsaber waving or blaster shooting was going to fix the problem. One person wasn't going to stop a war. They had to head to the backrooms, hammering out deal after deal in order to get their desired outcome. It was a whole new fight altogether, one Anakin knew he would be forced to rely on Jacen if he wanted to get things done. Sure he had helped the Yuuzhan Vong stabilize themselves, but Galactic Alliance senators were a different breed of politician.
"So, where are you thinking about starting?" Anakin said lightly.
"Senatorial committees," Jacen replied with a grimace. "The High Council may have a lot of power, but they'll listen to the will of the senate. I have to get the Aid Appropriation and Resettlement committee, Home Defense committee, and Inter-State Relations committee, on our side if we want to do this. Also, the Corporate Sector Authority, which has influence in several thousand star systems and is heavily involved in the security of countless Mid and Outer Rim worlds, has its hands in AARc, so their support is a must."
"I'll try testing the waters with the Corellia-Hapes issue. Hopefully Senator Triebakk and the Wookies can lend some initial support while we try to get things going."
"Good idea," Jacen nodded seriously. "And Triebakk should be willing to help, make sure you put him in contact with the Hapan Senatorial representative Lol Miilarta. She's a veteran politician and was instrumental in getting Hapes allied to the New Republic during the Yuuzhan Vong War. You can count on her."
"Got it."
Almost as if waiting for their conversation to end, the *Veila* chimed in. "*Sorry for the interruption non-ship people Jacen and Anakin, but I was monitoring the HoloNet and found something that might be relevant to your current discussion."*
"Go ahead and play it." Anakin turned and activated the holo-emitter. A moment later, the image of Jedi Master Kenth Hamner and Admiral Cha Niathal appeared over the HoloNet projector. *"Citizens of the Galactic Alliance, it is with the most solemn of honor that Admiral Niathal and myself put our names forward in the upcoming election for Chief of State as co-Chief of State. We intend to reverse the nearly half-decade of neglect and mismanagement that has seen this galaxy go from boom to bust. No longer will opportunities be squandered. No longer will politicians be allowed to let greed motivate their actions.*

Together, Admiral Niathal and myself will bring about an era of change for this galaxy. Rather than reign in our resources, we will spare no expense at fixing up planets and restoring Mid and Outer Rim worlds. The Jedi, which have been muzzled by this current administration, will be freed from their duties onboard warships and be given full autonomy to do what must be done to heal this ailing galaxy."
Cha Niathal stepped forward. "*If elected, the military will remain under my command. Rather than have civilians and tired politicians dictate military strategy, the men and women of our armed forces can be at peace knowing that their superiors have military experience and know what they are doing. While Master Hamner and the Jedi pave the way with humanitarian efforts and incorruptible morals, the Galactic Alliance navy shall be proudly reclaiming its title as the strongest military force in this galaxy. Without the restraints of Senatorial decrees, we will finally be able to put an end to the various marauders and ruffians that have turned our galaxy into a cesspool of evil. So, next election, vote myself and Master Hamner into office and we will initiate the change this galaxy sorely needs."*
The transmission ended, and both brothers looked to one and other with haggard expressions.
"Nothing's ever easy, is it?" Anakin sighed. "Now we not only have to convince the politicians to back us, but the rest of a fed up galaxy as well."
"It all depends on what the galaxy thinks it needs more, less Jedi intervention or more," Jacen rubbed his forehead as if to ward off a headache. "I'll need to pull in Saav'etu and Barv for this if we're going to have a fighting chance."
"What have those two been up to?" Anakin tilted his head, vaguely recalling the purple-eyed Bothan and her Ramoan friend.
"Barv's been working the various trade organizations," Jacen explained. "The deal he helped make with the Corporate Sector Authority was the final nail in the Hutts' coffin. Instead of the high dues and non-standard trading practices that differed from Hutt system to system, the Corporate Sector Authority abolished most of the tariffs levied by the Hutts and created a uniformed system that helped to stabilize commerce along the Triellus Trade Route and Kaaga Run. Though the deal helped enrich several higher ups, since the Hutts weren't in any condition to maintain the trade routes, it kept the trade routes in the region from collapsing. It was meant to be a stop-gap measure, but recent events are keeping that deal in place by sheer necessity."
"He did this all by himself?" Anakin blinked, eyebrows raising.

"No," Jacen chuckled ruefully. "He and a team of about seven Jedi had to hammer out that deal. Yaqeel handled the systems along the Kaaga Run, also known as the Bothan side of things. It's why the Bothans currently control half of what was once Hutt Space. She's also been instrumental in the take down of several slave rings. You heard about the Zygerrians, right? She and her apprentice were half of the team that dismantled the fledging slaving empire two years ago."
"It sounds as if everyone's been busy," Anakin said, shaking his head in disbelief.
"The galaxy *still* has to be run. Even if *you* take seven years off, the problems don't," Jacen said glibly. "Our primary problem is that we need that one person to give us direction. The High Council and Senate certainly isn't helping things by being in a state of perpetual deadlock. You actually came along at a time when everyone needed someone to look to to lead them, even the masters. Hope you're ready for it."
Anakin smiled wanly at Jacen. "Doesn't really matter, does it? If the others are expecting me and Tahiri to pull some trick out of a hat, I have to oblige them. While their minds are open to change and a new start, I have to take advantage of that. The alternative is letting them fall back onto their despair and frustration. "
"*We* have to take advantage of that, Little Brother," Jacen reminded. "Jaina would space me if I let you tackle the galactic government by yourself."
Anakin gazed out the cockpit at the swirling abyss of hyperspace. "I kind of do miss her, you know. She was always very supportive of Tahiri and myself and I think that's what we need now more than ever. Someone to support us if this blasted, half-witted plan of mine blows up in our faces. I mean, I'm not only trying to change the course of an entire galaxy, but I'm also putting my own family in the crosshairs as well. It's not a feeling I'm use to, nor is it one I like."
"Yeah," Jacen empathized, his own gaze drifting out to the void beyond the panel of transparasteel. "Ever get the feeling that we can save the galaxy, but lose our family at the same time. That it's one or the other, not all or nothing?"
Anakin's eyes darted to his brother at the tired note in Jacen's voice. "What have you seen in the Force, Jace?"
Jacen started to shake his head, then stopped and sighed. "I already shared a little of what I saw with Tenel Ka, and I know she would tell me to share it with you if she were here. So, here it is, I guess…. The visions were about our Allana, the type of galaxy she would live in. The galaxy was at peace and the throne was hers, but only if I wasn't in the picture. If I was still around, the galaxy was fractured, and the throne

was empty. I saw fleets burning, mountains of dead with a single shadowy figure standing above it all. I knew that my family was alive, that I still had Allana and Tenel Ka at my side, but the rest of the galaxy was suffering because of it. I just…It's kind of hard not to misinterpret an image like that."
"What about me and Jaya?" Anakin asked softly.
Jacen shrugged. "The Force wasn't kind enough to be that specific, and my instructors all warned me the perils of trying to find out too much about the future that has yet to happen."
"Well, as far as I know, Jace. Until you go crazy and decide to do something crazy like giving up being a Jedi to raise baby Rancors, or declaring yourself a Lord of the Sith, or Grand Kowakian Monkey Lizard, Tahiri and I have your back. We're *all* your family, Jacen. And do you really think I'm about to let my niece grow up in a world without her dad or mom? Tahiri knows all about that lost little orphan of two Force-sensitives angle, and while she ended up in a good spot, she doesn't recommend it to anyone else. That's why the both of us are going to stay alive for Cassa and Jayce for as long as the Force lets us."
"And if it comes down to the galaxy or them?" Jacen asked coolly, his brown eyes solemn as he recognized the understanding in his brother's eyes.
Anakin swallowed, his eyes flicking to his feet for a moment as his own mental barriers slipped at the question. It was one he had been asking himself repeatedly since arriving back in the galaxy. It was one he really had no answer to. His duty as a Jedi, as a Solo, was to the galaxy, to its wellbeing. But he was also a husband and father who had a duty to his family. He could feel his brother's own doubt at their plan, one that mirrored his own. They both may *look* as if they knew what they were doing, but in the end they were both just two young men with newly minted families, trying to survive a galaxy drastically different than the one they had grown up in.
Finally, Anakin met his brother's eyes again. "Then I would do my damnedest to make sure that situation never arises in the first place. Tahiri also wouldn't let it come to that. Then we would try to help you and Jaina get out of whatever mess you're in so we can tackle the galaxy as the Solos should. As a family."
"Still the dreamer, Anakin," Jacen replied softly, shaking his head. "We aren't little kids any more. There are problems even we can't beat."
"Only if we think there are," Anakin rejected. "We *are* going to get through this, Jace. Your family. my family. Heck whatever family Jaina might have by now with that Clawcraft guy. Mom, dad, and our friends

too. I didn't come back to this galaxy just to watch everything we fought for in the war slip away."
"Then I hope you're right, Anakin. I really do. Because we haven't even begun the fight for what promises to be a very long battle in an even bigger war."
(-(-(II)-)-)
The peace, quiet, and relative anonymity Anakin had enjoyed with his family pretty much evaporated the moment they had emerged from the hangar bay. Apparently, the word that he and Tahiri had returned to the galaxy had gotten out and spread like a wildfire. The moment the hangar doors whooshed open, bright lights and flashbulbs from countless holocams immediately greeted his party. Reporters began blurting out questions, shoving microphones at them as if their careers depended on it.
Of course all of the ruckus and the surprise emanating from Tahiri and Anakin woke the until-then-sleeping Jayce; his dissatisfied and confused wail causing Anakin to glare sharply at some of the louder reporters. At the same time, Cassa had quickly hid herself behind Anakin's leg, obviously just as bewildered and scared of the attention as her little brother was.
"Hey," Jacen said in a low voice, kneeling next to her while his little brother tried to tame the unruly mass of reporters.
Panicked green eyes darted towards him. "Uncle Jacen?"
Jacen held out a hand and gently picked Cassa up with one arm. "I know they're a bit loud. Try to ignore them. If you can, use the Force to keep their noise from making your brother cry."
"How?" Cassa looked to where her brother was being rocked back and forth by her mom, his distress still clear in the Force.
"Think of surrounding him in a Force bubble," Jacen instructed, lightly rubbing Cassa's back. "Then fill that bubble with all your feelings, making sure nothing outside the bubble can get through."
"Mommy and daddy do that with me," Cassa brightened. Still facing her brother's direction, she squeezed her eyes shut and began to concentrate.
Meanwhile, Anakin had finally managed to organize the mass of reporters, very obviously dissatisfied with their first impression.
"I'll be willing to give an interview in due time," Anakin said with as much patience as he could muster. Which was very little at the moment. After his conversation with his brother, he couldn't help to feel slightly on edge about the situation, and the reporters definitely weren't helping any. "But as you've currently upset my family, I'm afraid you won't be getting anything productive from me at the

moment. Work with me, I'll work with you. Hound and harass me and my family, you won't get anything worth writing about."
"But Anakin Solo, just why have you returned? Can you give us *something*?"
Anakin paused, his eyes briefly flicking over to where his older brother was holding a no-longer frightened Cassa in one arm. *We're family*.
Anakin released a low breath and nodded once. "I guess it's only fair. I'm back because the problems in this galaxy have started to spread beyond its limits. We've begun seeing the negative affects all the way on Zonama Sekot, and we thought to stop the problem at its source. In short, I'm here to support my mother, Leia Organa Solo's run for the position of Chief of State, and to assist my brother in turning the current state of things around."
A flurry of questions immediately rose up, but Anakin held out his hands, and the crowd quieted.
"As I said, work with me, I'll work with you. Stay away from my family, and I'll grant you interviews and answer your questions. Now my brother and I have a meeting with the Outer Rim Relief Committee, so if you'll excuse us."
The throng of reporters miraculously parted at Anakin's words. Though some flashbulbs did go off, the reporters more or less let Anakin and the others through without any further hassle. The crowd of reporters dispersed, and the curving hallway that made up a part of the outer ring of the starport once again returned to normal. Arrival and departures were still announced over the public address system, droids went about their business, and baffled travelers gradually resumed their initial tasks.
"The *Falcon's* berth is just over there," Nelani Dinn gestured to the hangar bay doors three segments down. The doors were already opening, revealing Han, Leia, C3PO, Kam, and Mara, and Ben, and Kani.
It had been a big surprise when Mara insisted on coming on the trip. Despite having 'retired' from the political life, evidently, if her nephews were playing turn-the-galaxy-on-its-head once more, she was going to be there to see it. For a more private reason, Anakin suspected she had joined their little excursion so his uncle didn't have to. Grandmaster Luke Skywalker was still on Ossus, looking after Janek and the younger Jedi. Of course, with Mara going, Ben insisted on coming along as well, and he made sure to keep his own best friend in the loop as well.
As much as Mara didn't want her son exposed to the nitty-gritty political realm until much later, she had relented provided the two ten

year olds stayed close to her. Of course, just because the reporters in the hallway had cleared a way for Anakin and his party, didn't mean that they were completely gone.
One sharp-eyed individual saw the former Hand of the Emperor and the 'famed' Ben Skywalker, and like vultures, the crowd of reporters coalesced and descended upon the second group in record time.
"Master Skywalker, can you comment on Kenth Hamner's run for office?"
"Ben, over here! What brings you all the way over to Denon? Jedi lessons not exciting enough?"
"Princess Leia! Princess Leia, is what your son said true? Are you planning to run against Kenth and Cha in the upcoming elections?"
Leia raised an eyebrow, her gaze piercing through the crowd and causing her youngest son to grimace sheepishly. Seasoned politician that she was, however, she answered the question with a patient smile. "Yes, that is true. I've only just decided to throw my name into the ring yesterday, so forgive me if I don't have a prepared speech like Master Hamner and Admiral Niathal."
That brought a few chuckles. And, as if realizing a story was developing, the rest of the reporters abandoned Mara and Ben to circle Leia. "But Master Hamner is a Jedi, and there is no doubting your close allegiance to the order your brother founded. Why run against him?"
Leia regarded the crowd evenly, a woman of her slight stature might have disappeared in the towering crowd of reporters and holocams, but she somehow seemed to make herself stand out. "Master Hamner and myself agree that reforms are sorely needed for this government to better help the people it is supposed to serve. What we disagree upon is the nature of those reforms. Both he and Admiral Niathal believe that the answer lies in military might and Jedi intervention. I respectfully disagree. My own view on the matter is that the Jedi have done all they can, and a new solution is needed. I will need to work out the details, as I said, I only decided to become a candidate for Chief of State just yesterday, but I intend to work with the member states of the Galactic Alliance to increase their responsibilities to their people, and at the same time decrease the responsibilities we've placed upon the Jedi Order. An organization of smaller than some member governments can in no way fix all the galaxy's problems. In fact, more problems are created if we wait around and expect them to solve every issue that pops up. So, to put it simply. Master Hamner and Admiral Niathal wish greater Jedi participation in our government, I wish the exact opposite. And in nine months from now, it will be up to the public to decide which direction they want their government to go

in. Now if you'll excuse myself and my family, we have much to do, as you can imagine."
After a few hurried questions went unanswered, the flock of reporters once again dispersed. In the meantime, Leia led her group over to where Anakin and his group were standing.
"Want to bet who gets front page?" Anakin said, grimacing apologetically at his mom.
"No bet, you will," Leia said dryly. "Right now, all I am is one more politician with an idea. Until I start getting results, the media outlets won't pay me much attention; even if I was the former Chief of State. And don't worry about the media, word that I'm in the running was bound to get out sooner or later."
"One thing that should work in our favor," Kam Solusar spoke up. "I know for a fact the Jedi Masters won't appreciate Kenth's attempts to drag the Jedi Order deeper into the political structure of things." He looked to Leia. "Your brother drilled into all our heads that Jedi aren't meant to be play the role Kenth wants us to play. Having the Jedi of the High Council speak out against Kenth's position should raise more than a few eyebrows."
"Thanks, Kam," Leia said sincerely. "Anakin, Jacen, will you two be okay carrying out your agenda?"
"Will you be okay carrying out yours?" Jacen asked concernedly.
Leia smiled faintly. "I may have been out of the business for a while, but I still know what to do. You just make sure the rest of the senate is ready for the changes. If there's one thing that's remained constant is that many of the politicians here *really* dislike giving up their power and get jealous if they see their colleagues gaining it."
"We'll tread carefully," Anakin said reassuringly.
"Okay then," Han clapped his hands together. "Mara, Leia, and I will continue putting her campaign together. Kam will be our guy to go to if we have High Council issues. And you kids have fun doing the sort of political intrigue that gives me headaches."
"Another Solo-Skywalker family outing," Tahiri said brightly.
"Don't you guys do anything for fun?" Kani asked with wide eyes, standing next to Seha.
"Do we?" Anakin and Jacen looked at their parents and Mara.
"Rearranging the galaxy isn't fun enough for you?" Mara raised an eyebrow.
"I meant as a hobby," Kani said quickly.
"Well," Han scratched his head. "When I was Jacen's age, I had already had my blood stripes, was an accomplished smuggler, and knew what I

wanted out of life. It wasn't fun for me unless I had a stockpile of credits and a place to spend it."
"Don't look at me," Leia held out her hands. "When I was twenty-six I was already the Minister of State for the New Republic and was dealing with all the warlords and dark side survivors of Palpatine's era."
"I already had a career as the Emperor's Hand and was working for Karde at twenty-six," Mara quickly said, when all eyes looked to her. "I was still obsessed about killing my future-husband then, so no fun."
Kam likewise held up his hands. "Part of the Dark Side Elite, had just about as much fun as Mara."
Kani and Ben looked back and forth between the adults in disbelief.
"Fine, what did you do for fun when you were *kids*?" Kani amended.
"I was training to be a Jedi, and then hiding from Sith," Kam sighed at the memories past. "Back then, fun was definitely out of the question."
"Training to be the Emperor's Hand. Palpatine wasn't really big on fun," Mara chipped in.
"Grew up on Alderaan as a member of the royal family," Leia shrugged. "Had to learn how to be a proper princess."
"No kidding," Han said under his breath, receiving a light swat in punishment.
"What about you, Uncle Han?" Ben asked Han. "Did you do anything for fun?"
"Depends on your definition of fun," Leia said fondly.
Han glowered at her, then turned back to the ten-year old and straightened proudly. "As a matter of fact, you're looking at two-time swoop racing champ of the Junior Corellian Swoop Track. When I decided to quit and sell my swoop bike, I made quite a bit of credits."
"What's a swoop-bike? Or a swoop race?" Kani said, tilting her head in confusion.
"It's like an ancient version of a speeder bike mixed with a pod-racer," Ben murmured. "Tionne told me that swoop racing was very popular in the *very* old days."
"Hey!" Han said with mock offense. "The emphasis wasn't needed, *kid.*"
"Sorry uncle," Ben said angelically, to a round of light chuckles from his family.
"Daddy and I go exploring on Zonama Sekot for fun," Cassa supplied, wiggling out of Jacen's arms and making her way over to Anakin. "I also have the *Veila* teach me words in other languages. Daddy had a copy of nearly all the major languages download into her. I play with my friends and Sahil, and Little Bantha too. Did you know Little Bantha's a *rakamat*?"

"I really feel sorry for you Ben," Kani said with mock-sympathy, patting his arm with a grin. "It's like not having fun is practically ingrained in your genes."
"Thanks for making me feel better, knew you were my best friend for a reason," Ben rolled his eyes.
"And we're having fun," Mara defended her genetics. "It's just a different sort of fun most people wouldn't consider fun."
"Exactly. Saving the galaxy's fun, you'll see," Ben said brightly.
"Don't worry," Han said in a faux whisper to the wide-eyed ten year old girl. "I know exactly how you feel."
Using the Force briefly, Kani sighed. "I guess you do. Glad I'm not the only one that thinks Ben's family is insane."
"As fun as this is, we really should be going," Leia said solemnly. "There's no doubt that Kenth and Cha will pull out all the stops when they realize my stance on the Jedi. Desperate people are willing to do things they might normally consider out of the question."
"Okay then, good luck mom, dad, auntie, Kam, kids," Jacen waved, grouping Ben and Kani together. "Hope this goes as well as we hope it does."
"That makes two of us," Han gave a two finger salute. "Be careful Jacen, Anakin. Tahiri, Seha, Nelani, make sure they don't do anything *too* crazy."
The three girls grimaced, looking at Jacen and Anakin dubiously. "We'll try."
Mara smiled in amusement. "Not every day I get to plot to legitimately overhaul the ruling galactic government. May the Force be with you all."
(-(-(III)-)-)
"Lady Miilarta, this is my brother, Anakin Solo," Jacen introduced. "Anakin this is Lady Lol Miilarta, a trusted member of the Queen Mother's court and the person Tenel Ka trusts to advance her agenda in the Galactic Alliance Senate. She served the previous Queen Mother as well, so she's been in the game a long while. Lady Miilarta, I shall leave my brother to you."
"Senator Solo," Lol tilted her head in acknowledgement. Jacen gave his brother a parting bow of his head, and left the room.
In the silence, Anakin moved to the Hapan senator's desk and bowed politely. "Lady Miilarta, it's nice to meet you."
As he rose, he evaluated Tenel Ka's choice for the Hapan senatorial seat. The woman was probably around his parents' age, though with Hapan women, age was always difficult to discern. With a warrior's

grace, the woman stood tall, dark red hair streaked with gray tied up into a customary and functional bun.
"Jedi Solo," Lol Miilarta returned, she gestured for Anakin to take a seat in front of her desk. "Your brother has informed me of the… complicated…situation."
"Complicated it is," Anakin rejoined wryly. "We're trying to get allies for Hapes to ward off a potential war with the Corellians, but are more than likely to trigger the war the moment Corellia realizes Hapes is looking for allies. And this is on top of all the oh so fun Hapan politics that makes me question Jacen's sanity."
"I've informed the Queen Mother of your plans, and she has expressed her full support."
"She has?" Anakin blinked in surprise. "Normally a leader of sixty-three star-systems would go through great pains to *stop* a foreign-power-backed coup from occurring. Not eagerly seek to induce it."
"I believe having a daughter has altered her mind-state," Lol replied tonelessly. "The Queen Mother intends to 'clean house' as it were so that the *chume'da* would not have to deal with the traitorous cowards when she assumes the throne. By the way, the Queen Mother likewise wishes to express her fondest of welcomes at your return to this galaxy."
Anakin chuckled softly. "When I get a chance, I'll say 'hi' to her in person."
"Shall we get to business then?" Lol pulled out a datapad. "I've had the opportunity to review the list of potential allies you've sent. Hapes has long been trying to court many of them and develop trade-ties between our peoples. Manress, Corvanni, Onderon, Taanab, we've made tentative offers to each system, but in five years of negotiations, things haven't gone beyond that."
"What is the problem?"
"A majority of Hapan nobility remains staunchly opposed to outside alliances," Lol answered dourly. "They believe that since Hapes has survived for millennia isolated from the rest of the galaxy, that there is no reason to break with tradition. Heading the effort to thwart outside economic ties is the Heritage Council, who believe it is their ancestral duty to preserve Hapan way of life and reject all outside influence. They command a sizable block of nobility and have more than frustrated the Queen Mother's efforts to form treaties with outside governments. Unfortunately, my own homeworld is among them. They never anticipated that an alliance with the New Republic would get us so involved in galactic affairs."

"Then how did Tenel Ka get the alliance with the Bothans to come about?"
"You are aware of the True Victory Party, yes?"
"The extreme right-wing political faction advocating for the annihilation of the Yuuzhan Vong race, I'm familiar with it, yes."
"The Heritage Council happens to agree with the stance of the True Victory party. Hapes lost well over twenty-four million people, civilian and military, during the war, a large majority coming at Centerpoint, the Battle for Hapes, and the Battle for Dac. Such losses would have devastated a smaller military force and even caused the collapse of governments. Then, when the war was over, the Yuuzhan Vong under Shimrra were essential pardoned by the Galactic Alliance and allowed to live without any punishment. Tell me, Jedi Solo. If a race of people slaughtered over twenty-four million of your own kin, would *you* have let them live without punishment?"
"So, angry Hapans." Anakin said in nonanswer.
"Angry Hapans," Lol concurred. "The Queen Mother was aware of the anti-Yuuzhan Vong sentiment among much of her people and decided to capitalize on it to advance her own agenda. As Bothawui is the home of the True Victory movement, as well as a strong economic and military presence, they made the most opportune of allies. Though the Queen Mother herself disagrees with their political position, there is no denying the positive economic and social benefits seen by Hapes due to her political maneuvering. At the moment, however, Hapes remains isolated and Bothawui provides our only avenue into the rest of the galaxy."
"I see. So, until now, the only way to get the Hapan nobility and public in general to accept more outside allies is to have them be ideologically compatible?"
"Which is why I believe she has accepted your plan."
Anakin rubbed at his face tiredly. "Someone should tell her that my plans generally involve chaos to an unhealthy level, and that she really shouldn't eagerly embrace my ideas."
"Given your record, I did," Lol said a bit more bitingly than she probably meant.
"Huh?"
"Unlike most of her advisors, I am allowed a fair degree of autonomy due to my being one of the few who wholly agrees that Hapes has to be more than it currently is. When your brother first sent me the datapad detailing your plan, I immediately objected and informed the Queen Mother of my dissatisfaction with your insanity. It is one thing to

challenge the nobility, but an entirely other thing all together to deliberately provoke a war so all of Hapes can be united."
"And how did she take it?"
"Her exact words were, 'We have tried things the conventional route for five years, with minimal success. Now, with my daughter born, Corellia threatening, and Hapes still as isolated as ever, I believe it is time to dispense with the conventional and try something…insane.'"
Anakin hung his head, hiding a smile. "She's definitely a Solo."
"You do know that if I were anyone else, I'd take that as an insult to the throne?" Lol said, mock-offense lacing her dry tones, her blue eyes glimmered. "It would be your brother, should he become crown-prince, who would take on *her* name."
"Jacen Djo?"
"Unless you think he'd be satisfied as her consort? He'd be permitted to keep his family name then."
"You know, as insane as my plans are, I think those two are crazier. Even *I* don't know what they'll do next. Granted, I've been gone for a good chunk of time but their thought-processes run on completely different tracks than my own."
"Perhaps it is why the Queen Mother agreed to your plan," Lol glanced back down to the datapad and returned to business. "To cut through the bureaucracy, I have full authority to make diplomatic treaties on behalf of Hapes. The rest of the nobility, along with several trusted Hapan corporations are also onboard. So long as the diplomats of these listed systems have similar authority, we should be able to make the initial treaties without any problem."
"The main issue is keeping these treaties from Corellia and her allies before they're all in place. The last thing we want is to make a treaty and then have Corellia park sparkling new battle cruisers in orbit above Hapes' new ally. The more diplomats we approach, the harder it will be to hide our efforts."
"And it sounds as if you have a solution."
"A possible one, not sure if it will work out the way we want it to, though."
"Your brother warned me about you. What is your solution?"
"I can't take full credit for it. Jacen was the one who worked most of it out. We choose a couple of the more harmless system to make alliances with; systems that don't have grand military forces or threaten Corellian trading routes. Then, acting through them, we have other systems on our list ally with those systems, and so on. We'll make it look as if these smaller systems are forming their own

commonwealths in order to survive in these troubled times. At the very head of it all, however, will be Hapes."
"So, you set up an entire network with few roads leading to Hapes, when in actuality, every aspect of this network relies on Hapan participation?"
"Not necessarily. Jacen and I didn't want any negative repercussions on these allies should anything happen to Hapes, so the network can still function if Hapes isn't in the picture, just less efficiently until one of the governments steps up to assume the role Hapes filled."
"Even going with your plan it will still take a while for us to work out the plethora of treaties that need to be made."
"Then we should probably start as soon as we can," Anakin nodded seriously. "I have no idea how long it will take for the Corellians to act, and the worst-case scenario is that they'll begin their attack before our treaties are in place. Hapes can probably hold them off with Bothawui help, but I'd rather not let it get to that point. Right now Hapes is alone. With allies, that changes the equation. If the Corellians learn that their participation means being dragged into a galactic-sized civil war, I doubt they'd continue with their plans."
"I concur. Let us begin with these systems. As I mentioned earlier, the Queen Mother has already made some overtures and they've proven receptive to an economic alliance."
"It'll be a pleasure to work with you, Lady Miilarta."
"Likewise, Jedi Solo. Pray that the galaxy will be considerate enough to let us finish this insane plan of yours."
"It should be," Anakin glowered at the ceiling, daring the galaxy to do otherwise. "But knowing my luck, I highly doubt it."
(-(-(IV)-)-)
The next five days on Denon had been a whirlwind of petitions, motions, and meetings, with varying levels of frustration and suspense. Jacen handled the fun task of trying to reform a recalcitrant government, while Anakin and Lady Miilarta tested the waters to see what peoples' interest were in forming an alliance with the Hapan Consortium under its current Queen Mother. Needless to say, complex trade-negotiations and diplomatic wrangling wasn't exactly his forte, despite the years spent building up Yuuzhan Vong civilization. It wasn't that the various governments and systems weren't open to new avenues of income, and new sources of raw material, it was just that they were more than a little scared of the clout the Corellians brought to bear. Corellia had a dozen or so systems in its pocket, had ties with the Corporate Sector Authority and the many industries within that umbrella of worlds. To get on Corellia's bad-side at this point in time

would be very close to economic-suicide in a very economically unstable galaxy. Despite the political mire, the search for allies was proving surprisingly positive.

The Queen of Onderon showed interest in forming political ties through the marriage of their nobility, and the establishment of trade. Like Hapes, Onderon tended to be rather insular in nature and its young queen was trying to push reforms similar to Tenel Ka's. The added benefit of being next door neighbors also seemed to make any treaty all the more attractive. The only downside was that Onderon wasn't keen to support Tenel Ka militarily, as their navy was relatively small. Unlike Hapes, the royalty of Onderon only controlled its immediate system and the seven other planets within.

But Onderon wasn't the only government eager to form new economic ties. The pacifistic world of Naboo was onboard for the economic benefits. And surprisingly, when the Imperial Remnant overheard one of the conversations, they showed interest in an alliance as well. All in all, nearly two dozen separate governments were willing to form economic and political ties with the Hapan Consortium whether officially or 'unofficially' through a Hapan proxy. The only downside was that only a few of those governments were willing, or were even able, to pledge their military forces to back up those potential new ties. The Imperial Remnant had actually asked *for* military support in the event of a war against the Chiss, promising their own ships in the matter with the Corellians once the issue was dealt with. It was a week full of mixed successes, frustrations, and countless negotiations, seemingly without end. The brightest plus was that Corellia hadn't seemed to take notice of these backroom deals, and had yet to launch their attack yet.

Anakin groaned mentally, closing his eyes as he used the Force to steady himself. He had forgotten how taxing everything could be. He knew he was fortunate that his wife and children were there for him after each long and tiring day, and that he'd be a wreck without them. He breathed in deeply, Tahiri's scent calming him as he tightened his arm around her. She was asleep, spooned against him while Jayce slept in his crib off to the side of the bed. Both Tahiri and Mara had gotten together to form an impromptu 'class' for Ben, Kani, and Cassa, often taking the three on tours of Denon. The youngest of the trio loved the attention she was receiving from Ben and Kani. Mara had been right, Kani had become fiercely protective of the talkative blonde, and Cassa definitely enjoyed having a 'big sister.' She was currently having a 'sleep over' with the older girl, enjoying the unique atmosphere that was the *Falcon.*

Meanwhile, Anakin and Tahiri had elected to return to the *Veila* after the hard days' work. Unfortunately, the Force apparently decided that his day wasn't over just yet. As he was about to join his wife in a much needed deep sleep, he saw the comm-panel by the door blink to indicate an incoming message. He briefly wondered if he should pretend he didn't see it, but he knew that the *Veila* wouldn't have forwarded the message to the cabin if it wasn't important.

With a reluctant sigh, Anakin planted a kiss on the top of his wife's head and slipped out of bed. Quietly, he made his way to the comm-panel. "Go ahead."

"Sorry to wake you, Anakin. But there's been an incident with the Remnant," Mara's voice was filled with tension.

"Incident?"

"An official courier just delivered a message to the Senate chambers. The Imperial Remnant has entered into war with the Chiss Ascendancy on grounds of incessant aggression towards their ships and people."

"What?" Anakin forced his brain to jolt back to some semblance of functionality. Hard to do after an entire day's worth of political haggling with expert hagglers

"Details aren't really clear. Apparently Chiss fighters engaged a Victory-class Star Destroyer in Imperial space, newly claimed space I might add, in the Wild Space region. Heavy damage was done to the supply ships being escorted, as well as the Star Destroyer itself, but the Imps managed to pursue to the attackers to a Chiss Colonial Outpost. In standard Imperial protocol, the captain of the Star Destroyer razed the colony, and things went downhill from there."

"Isn't Jaina supposed to be out there?"

"According to Jedi Ambassador Altamik, your sister's been out of contact for over a week. Chiss government isn't saying anything either. Just thought I'd let you know that Cal Omas is calling an emergency session of the Senate to get a handle on this latest mess."

"I'll be right there," Anakin yawned.

"Anakin?" Tahiri stirred.

"Just the usual galactic-level problems," Anakin ran a hand through her hair. "Go back to sleep."

"'Kay, love you," Tahiri murmured in response, using the Force to emphasis her words before drifting off to sleep again. It wasn't that Tahiri wanted to be at his side, but an energetic five year old, and a newborn baby drained even the strongest of Jedi of energy, and sleep was a rare commodity for her.

On cue, Jayce began crying. As a powerfully Force-sensitive child, a galaxy at peril wasn't something a developing mind enjoyed feeling,

and Jayce had been fairly restless the entire week they had been in the galaxy. Anakin quickly used the Force to ensure that his wife continued to get some sleep and gently lifted the month-and-a-half old infant from his cot. Carrying his son with the utmost care, Anakin surrounded him in a blanket of comforting Force energy as he took Jayce around the room. The infant made several abortive sobs, before resting his head on Anakin's shoulder.

"That's it Jayce," Anakin rubbed his back soothingly. "Think you can sleep the rest of the night? Daddy has a galactic crisis to attend to and your mommy really needs some sleep."

Jayce replied by shifting against his chest and falling fast asleep. Anakin made two more circuits around the room with Jayce tucked against his chest. It was times like this when he regretted coming back to the galaxy. He could remember doing something similar for Cassa when she had been a baby; walking around their spacious estate on Zonama Sekot until she settled down, and then carrying her back to bed. There had been no sense of urgency, nothing to force him to rush away before either of them were truly contented. But it was all different now.

Jayce began to whimper again, so Anakin quickly shoved those thoughts away and sat down in a chair, rocking Jayce back and forth. "Sorry, little guy. Just your dad being 'dad' again."

"I can take him, Anakin," Tahiri murmured, having likewise felt Anakin's disquiet. She looked beautiful even bereft of sleep and in a simple night gown. She smiled faintly at his thoughts and slid out of bed, crossing the short distance of the cabin to stand by his side.

"You sure? I can always walk a few hangars over and see if my mom can watch over him for a bit."

Tahiri rested her chin on one of his shoulders, embracing the both of them with the Force and her arms. "He's *our* son, Hero Boy. Go fix up the galaxy and come back to us as soon as you can. If he's anything like Cassa was, I only have a couple more months of this. I can take it."

Anakin very reluctantly handed his son over to his loving wife, making a mental vow to fix up the galaxy as fast as he possibly could. Tahiri took Jayce back to their bed and nodded reassuringly to him. With great reluctance, he grabbed a set of Jedi robes hanging on the wall and exited the ship.

A tram-ride and a brisk walk later, he was entering the Senate chambers in the middle of an Imperial delegation's apparently long-winded speech. From what he could hear, it sounded like things were being wrapped up. Anakin moved to a nearby balcony overlooking the

Senate floor, keeping his ear on the speech being broadcasted through the building.

"…So it is in that atmosphere of hostility that the Chiss fighter squadrons launched an unprovoked attack on the sovereign Imperial Star Destroyer *Redux* in the newly charted nebula of the Gulf of Tarkin," the crisp tones of the Imperial delegate deliberately laced with incredulity and anger. The blond-haired official projected an aura of one who was gravely insulted and seeking redress for the most heinous of crimes. "Several of the fighters escorting the *Redux* were destroyed in the ensuing skirmish, and three *unarmed* cargo vessels were damaged to the point where they had to be scrapped. Damage to the *Redux* was most severe, with its primary bridge tower and hangar bays set aflame by torpedoes used by the Chiss fighters. This egregious act of aggression was responded in kind by our stalwart men and women and we are now in a state of war with the Chiss Ascendancy. As such, the Empire calls upon the Galactic Alliance to aid us in warding off the Chiss offensive and to honor the ideals on which the Galactic Alliance was built upon. Article One, Section Two of the Galactic Alliance charter states that any act of violence towards a member of the Galactic Alliance by a non-member state will be construed as an act of violence against the entire Galactic Alliance. Whereby the Galactic Alliance will come to the aid of the besieged member and bring to justice those responsible."

Cal Omas looked weary as he inclined his head to one of the floating platforms. The room had been designed after the Senate Building on Coruscant, with the Chief of State's platform standing in the middle of a circular chamber full of hovering platforms containing the galactic delegates. "The Galactic Alliance will now hear from the guest delegation of the unaligned Chiss Ascendancy."

"Thank you, Chief of State." The platform with three Chiss hovered up to the forefront. One Chiss, in intricately stitched clothing, took the stand. "Gentlebeings of this galaxy, I am Aristocra Chaf'orm'bintrano of the ruling Chaf family and in charge of the Ascendancy's diplomatic relations with outside governments. I have come here to ask that you do not fall for the manipulations of an Empire that has made no secret of their disdain for my people. We have lodged multiple complaints regarding Imperial hostilities over the past five years and have documented many government-sponsored acts of violence towards the non-human civilians within Imperial territory. The Chiss stand by their policy of non-aggression, and the only reason why any of the CEDF would have fired on an Imperial vessel is if the Imperials fired first. That is, of course, if these 'fighters' the Imperial claimed attacked them

existed in the first place. The CEDF has no interest in Imperial survey teams, and in fact, despite the less than friendly terms of our two governments, often share starcharts with Imperial scouting vessels for areas this galaxy terms as the 'Unknown Regions.' We would have no reason to attack Imperial vessels outside of Chiss territory, much less be so foolish as to have our fighters fall back to a known Chiss garrison so soon after the attack. There can then be only one explanation for the deaths of several hundred Chiss soldiers at Outpost Theta, the colonial station razed by the Imperials after this so-called 'attack' by Chiss fighters. The Imperials conceived this entire plot for the sole purpose of dragging the Galactic Alliance into a prolonged war with my people."

The Imperial platform immediately spun back to center-stage. "This is an outrage! I will not stand by and let this, person, slander the name of the Empire! Nearly a thousand Imperial lives were lost in the attack! Are you saying we had our own people killed?"

"That would not be too far-fetched, I'd believe, given the Empire's track record," Formbi replied evenly.

Cal Omas brought a stop to it by sending the Chiss and Imperial platforms back to their spots. "We have all seen the evidence presented by both sides and have heard the testimonies of survivors from both the apparent Chiss and Imperial attacks. Full military support for the Imperial Remnant will not go forward without sixty-seven percent approval, though material support will be given at a simple majority. Senators present, cast your votes now."

Anakin watched with apprehension as a giant holo-screen began to tally the incoming votes. Despite the hour, most of the senate chamber was full, and the votes began to come in. It was immediately clear that the Chiss would not be on the winning side. The only question was whether or not the Galactic Alliance would militarily support the Remnant as well.

Leaning on the banister, Anakin watched the tallies increase, those rejecting Galactic Alliance involvement becoming overwhelmed by the sheer number of votes for such an intervention. In a way, Anakin could understand the logic. The Chiss were an 'outsider' enemy much like the Yuuzhan Vong had been. With many of the local governments stagnating or suffering, a new foe was needed, a foe that can actually be fought. Where a 'victory' could be clearly defined and celebrated. Those 'for' Galactic Alliance intervention began to cheer as the tally-marker reached sixty-percent and continued to rise. The Chiss delegation, realizing what would happen, excused themselves, leaving

the chamber as the celebratory din increased. Corporate Sector Authority-influenced worlds clamored for conflict.
Sixty-one percent.
Sixty-two percent.
Sixty-three percent.
Anakin could only shake his head. Was the galaxy really that hungry for another war?
Fortunately, Corellia, apparently still holding a grudge, decided to make their opinion on the matter known. The Corellian representative smiled smugly at the Imperial delegation as a 'no' vote was tallied. Almost immediately, an avalanche of votes against interference followed as the sectors allied to Corellia fell in line. The vote to intervene stalled at sixty-four percent, and the cheer died off. The last of the votes continued to come in, but everyone could see that the Imperials would not have the support they wanted. Finally, firmly rejecting military intervention, the Bakurans and their trade network scuttled the Imperials' hopes of galactic military support.
Cal Omas took the podium once more. "For this emergency session, the Senate has decided. The Imperial Remnant shall receive material support in the form of food goods, medical supplies, and non-lethal aid. Those who have their own treaties with the Imperial Remnant are allowed to provide additional aid as well, but no formal military support in the name of the Galactic Alliance will be given. Any material support given to the Chiss Ascendancy is now grounds for expulsion from the Galactic Alliance unless the transactions are part of pre-existing deals or vital to the economy of your system. That is all."
The Imperial delegation moved to the forefront once more. "The Empire gladly accepts whatever support you can give. We understand that these are tough times, so we will definitely remember those who have helped us in our time of need."
(-(-(V)-)-)
With the emergency senate meeting over, there was a small rush of individuals towards the Imperial platform to coordinate tactics and supply transfers, and a larger rush of senators and aides out the side-doors to get some much needed sleep. Anakin, on the other hand, made his way down to the Jedi Order's senate platform, where Jacen was talking in low tones with Seha and Nelani.
"Well, one of the things we didn't need came to pass," Anakin said with a false sense of calm, waiting for the trio to emerge from the Senate chambers.
"Wasn't as bad as it could have been," Jacen said nonchalantly. "Aunt Mara called you?"

"Yup," Anakin walked alongside his brother to his office. Even late at night, the firestorm kicked up by the outbreak of a war had the hallways of the senate building packed with people rushing from one location to the next. "Managed to get here at the tail end of things."
"Is this one of the linchpins you told us about on Ossus, Jedi Knight Solo?" Nelani asked, her long dark hair still kept in its bun by two lacquered hair pins. "One of the events that will send out ripples of chaos?"
"Most likely," Anakin leaned against the window pane of one of the five floor-to-ceiling windows that gave Jacen's office its view of Denon. Outside, city-lights and heavy cloud-cover ensured that the sky remained a vibrant orange and yellow, the streets and airlanes below just as busy as they were during the day. They hadn't bothered to turn on the office lights, allowing for the natural ambiance of Denon to keep the room awash in the glows of holosigns and the lowbeams of passing speeders.
"You have doubts?" Seha asked, hiding a yawn.
"If the puppet-masters control both the Chiss and the Hapan situations, they would have had Corellia vote for Galactic Alliance military support," Jacen clarified. His conflicted feelings of relief and frustration echoed by his brother. Relief that they were somewhat right about their plans. Frustration from being unable to do anything about it and running into more questions.
"Without Galactic Alliance military support, what will happen to the Remnant?" Nelani questioned, taking a seat in the lush chair behind Jacen's desk while her master stared out another window.
"The war will still go on, the Empire will most likely win, but it will take much longer than if they had GA support, and it will be confined to their segment of space," Anakin answered.
"Someone went out of the way to ensure the war stayed small," Jacen concurred. "Stayed small and would last as long as it could. The Chiss won't surrender; it's not in their nature. The Imperials won't give any quarter, but they won't foolishly throw away ships either; not after seeing how much damage the Yuuzhan Vong could do to them when they had been at full strength."
"What will that accomplish?" Seha frowned, her tiredness felt in the Force. It had been a long day. The red-haired apprentice had stretched herself out on the couch, and Jacen had draped the outer layer of his Jedi robe over her.
"Apart from destabilizing the Remnant and Ascendancy, any war would reduce their ability to respond militarily to another threat," Anakin answered pensively. He then smirked at his brother. "By the way, Jace,

your apprentices are pretty sharp. They've been asking the questions I've been asking myself since the Senate meeting."
"Can't take all the credit," Jacen laughed softly. He patted Nelani on the shoulder affectionately. "They're naturally bright. Red over there is that little voice in my head that keeps me on my toes, and Nelani here is a natural thought deflector."
"Deflector?" Anakin raised an eyebrow in amusement. "Uh huh."
"Just when I think I have a handle on my beliefs, she sends them spinning with her questions," Jacen said. He affected a look of deep thought. "Now that I think about it, Little Brother, she reminds me a lot like you. Young, optimistic, always questioning. Always ensuring that the events I'm setting into motion are events I truly want to happen. She questions me, deflects those chain of events elsewhere, and pretty much makes me a better Jedi."
"Master!" Nelani blushed crimson, looking as if she wanted to vaporize in the comfy chair she had settled in. Jacen smiled at Nelani, causing her to sink even further into her chair.
"So," Jacen said, softening his voice as he sensed his other apprentice drift off to sleep. "What do we do?"
"Jaya's still out there with the Ascendancy, right?"
"Should be, Aunt Mara said she was out of touch though."
"Told me the same thing," Anakin paused. "I think we should do nothing."
"Nothing?"
"Jaina's our sister," Anakin offered tiredly. "Do you really think she'll be doing nothing while all that 'something' is happening in her neighborhood?"
"So we stick to our plan then?"
"Making minor tweaks here and there," Anakin confirmed without any confidence, silently hoping he wasn't making a mistake. Too much was at stake, but what else could they have done? "Now that one of the linchpins has been removed, we have to be quick to secure the others."
"We also know the perpetrators don't want a galaxy-wide war, now," Jacen said. "Even if that's something that's within their ability. How are the Hapan diplomatic efforts going?"
"As smooth as they can be," Anakin matched his brother's line of thinking. "We'll either be able to put together one heck of an alliance and scare the Corellians off, or the puppet-masters will launch their attack before the we're ready."
"Small, isolated wars," Nelani followed the conversation. "Among pretty much every major government with a navy."

Jacen looked to her. "What's on your mind?"
"Chiss, Remnant, Corellia, Hapes, Bothans, Vong. If all of their navies are taken out warring with one and other, who's left?"
"The Bakurans and Galactic Alliance Navy," Jacen noted. "The galaxy would be extremely weak when the embers finally cool."
"The Jedi Order would also be destroyed," Anakin said, rubbing at his eyes. "More like, we'd destroy ourselves trying to keep the galaxy together in place of those fleets."
"At least we know one thing," Jacen said.
"We do?" Anakin and Nelani looked to him.
"We have some time before the Corellian or Yuuzhan Vong wars are kicked off."
"What do you mean?" Anakin tilted his head.
"You described these events as ripples, little brother. And we've just seen that the perpetrators don't wish for complete chaos. Think of the surface of a pond. Start one ripple, the disturbance will spread. Start two ripples, one right next to the other, and there will be an area that is canceled out. But if you take your time, start a set of ripples, wait for it to dissipate, and then start a second set of ripples slightly away from the origin of the first, you will not only be affect a whole new region, but also stir up the regions already disturbed by first set."
"That makes sense," Anakin said, tossing the scenarios around in his mind. "How long do you think we'll have, Jace?"
Jacen shook his head. "Hard to say. You were always the better strategist, Anakin. Whenever I look to the Force for guidance, all I can see is a great darkness. What does your gut say?"
"I think…" Anakin said slowly. "Unless something happens on the Hapan front, we should hope Csilla can hold out for at least another month. That's how long Lady Miilarta and I need to finish our current round of negotiations and finalize most of the treaties."
Jacen's ears perked up at that. "Just in case, then, I think I'll talk with the heads of the Dathomiri Praxeum for my Plan B."
"Sure," Anakin nodded.
"Jedi Knight Anakin? Why Csilla?" Nelani asked, not sure how the Chiss capital connected with the Hapes issue.
"When Csilla falls, the shock will be felt around the galaxy," Anakin explained. "The once mighty and mysterious Chiss humbled by the remains of an Empire. If I was the puppet-master, that's when I'd start my second set of ripples. I'd want maximum galactic affect with minimal impact on the galaxy's long-term stability. I'd bet the Yuuzhan Vong are being saved for last, as a nail-in-the-coffin kind of move; so that'll leave Hapes."

"And if we can't stop that war?" Nelani asked in a small voice.
"We will," Jacen said firmly. He met his brother's eyes as distant lights bled through the window and covered them in a patchwork of colors and designs. He met his eyes, but was far from reassured by what he saw. "That's why I want to talk with Master Ti and come up with some more contingency plans"
"Until we know the 'who' and 'why', we're up against too great an unknown for me to give any promises. It's like playing dejaarik and not knowing who your opponent is. It could be a harmless droid programmed to let you win, or it could be a Wookie trying his best to win the game. Beat one, there's nothing to it. Beat the other, you get your arms torn out of your sockets."
"So you're saying…"
"In some cases, winning will be worse than if we lost," Anakin replied, turning back to look at Nelani and Jacen. "Because if these characters can manipulate this galaxy like they have the past handful of years, and they don't get their way, what's *their* Plan B? That's what I'm worried about most right now, Jace. If things don't go their way, we might not *really* like what they have planned next. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for stopping galactic catastrophes in the making, it's just something to think about."
"Great," Nelani groaned. "I'm going have nightmares now."
Jacen released a breath of amusement, inclining his head towards Anakin. "I have a feeling we will too, Nelani. Only problem is, when we wake up, the situation won't be any better."
(-(-(Chapter End)-)-)

Tenel Ka
(-(-(I)-)-)
Twenty-seven.
Her age. The number of years she had been alive in the galaxy. Seemingly a paltry amount, but more than many people ever made it too. Between the wars, famine, and the general chaos of life, she knew she was luckier than most.
Tenel Ka silently walked along the rows of books of the royal library, the morning light causing her copper hair to glow regally. She absently rubbed the back of her daughter as Allana nursed, oblivious to the solemn situation. For Tenel Ka, the moment of silence was a welcomed reprieve from what she knew would be a hectic day. As much as she tried to see the individual lives and planets in her domain, her day almost always devolved into numbers.
Twenty-seven, Tenel Ka reflected once more.

That was also the number of books about the royal family, about the Jedi, that had been published by Hapan companies since she had come to power. In every single book, the first chapter was *always* devoted to her, sometimes even the second as well. There had been a news report once, of a daring writer who had waited until the sixteenth chapter to mention her in any detail. His workshop had been burned to the ground by an angry mob, and he had been stoned nearly to death before the security forces intervened.

Thirty-one. The number of suitors, young and middle-aged, who had 'accidentally' lost their right arms at the elbow in duels. Some simply wanted to emulate her; others thought that by doing so she'd be more inclined to choose them as consorts. Intergalactic war aside, it had been something of a bewildering fad during her first few years as the Queen Mother. As time went on and many realized that lopping off their arm wasn't the best way to gain her affections, some opted for cybernetic arms to replace the one they loss; others continued to mimic her and refused the prosthetic.

Sixty-three. The number of star systems in the Transitory Mists she was responsible for. This was not counting the nearly two-dozen other systems in Hutt Space Hapes had taken control of when the Hutt Empire collapsed. Trading rights, family disputes, petty grudges, political games, she had to deal with all of that and still look as if she knew what she was doing. Still project the confidence and wisdom her people expected from her.

But how many twenty-seven year old women were in charge of the well-being of eighteen-plus billion lives and all of their conflicting interests? How many women her age had led fleets of thousands of ships into battle and returned with only a few hundred? She had survived a record-number of assassination attempts, and it was only because she was still alive that the record number continued to increase. The Hapan economy was growing more complicated as its doors were gradually opening to the outside galaxy, meaning a budget that had to be continually adjusted for the influx of credits and material goods that hadn't previously been available. At the same time, those millions of new credits were being used to help the everyday Hapans whose insular bubble had been thoroughly popped during the Yuuzhan Vong War.

All of that was data.

Cold, unfeeling numbers. Raw and quantifiable. When she had first arrived on Yavin IV for her Jedi training most of the people there saw her as cold, unfeeling, uncaring of anyone but herself and her status. They hadn't known then, but only by thinking for one's self, by

becoming apathetic to those around her, could one actually survive in Hapes' cut-throat royal palace. You begin to care, you begin to show mercy, and you'll have just painted a giant target on those you care for, and yourself. You *had* to view everyone as numbers, as variables in an equation, or you'd have gone insane. Or end up dead.

At least that's what common Hapan logic had dictated before she had arisen to the throne. Her time as a Jedi, adventuring along with Jacen and his group of friends, had shown her that there was indeed ways one could rule *and* care for one's people at the same time. At the same time, however, she couldn't completely discount the numbers as well. Corellia and her allies could bring to bear far more than the Hapan Royal Navy and the Bothans could, had more resources and ships. She also wouldn't let Hapes be the damsel-in-distress and require a 'rescuer' to save everything she and her mother had tried to build. As much as she trusted Anakin to get her the allies Hapes needed, Hapes still needed to pull its own weight. Something that was not possible at the moment given the Hapan state of mind.

Hapes had grown tired of war. The four years of the Yuuzhan Vong War had depleted their manpower and fleets to dangerous levels. The hidden fleet her mother had left her to defend Hapes had been utterly decimated defending Mon Calamari. The Royal Navy was only at a third of its strength, and much of that third was spent ensuring that Hapes did not develop the same pirate problems that plagued the rest of the galaxy. Instead of using the Hapan economy to rebuild the fleet, she had concentrated on using the funds to help build the infrastructure of Hapes and the Galactic Alliance restoration projects. After all, the population and economy had to recover first if those hundreds of thousands of lives and ships lost were to be replaced. One did not simply lose a military force of over several million people and hope to have the military bounce back in seven years. Nor could they afford to have the capitol planet invaded and ransacked by an ill-timed coup and hope to have life return to normal any time soon. Hapes was in no way ready for a full-scale war against a well-trained and well-equipped force such as the Corellians. But she couldn't say that out loud, couldn't let anyone else know how dire the situation was.

"We're in quite the mess, aren't we, Tenna?" a male voice came out from one of the arm chairs.

Tenel Ka wasn't at all fazed by the unexpected interruption. She recognized the voice immediately. It was hard not to recognize the voice of the only male to be accepted into the ranks of her elite guard. He had upset centuries of tradition and created more than his share of

political enemies in the process. Not that he cared. "Major Gadell Vessau."
"Forgive the interruption, Queen Mother" returned the major's perfunctory reply.
"You wouldn't have interrupted if it wasn't important," Tenel Ka sighed. She had known the man from her youth, before she had departed for Yavin IV. He had been as close to a friend as an isolated and ostracized, Dathomiri-Hapan princess could have, and had proven his loyalty time and again since she had taken the throne. He was also the only who called her 'Tenna'—a childhood nickname—and could get away with it. "Report, Gadell."
"It was as you feared, Queen Mother. The Heritage Council is most definitely involved with the Corellians. To what extent, I don't know. But it seems extremely out of place for them considering their stance against any alliance with an outside government."
"Is the entire Heritage Council aware?"
"Fairly certain," Gadell replied, his figure still hidden by the high back of the reading chair he was in. "Their planetary fleets are mobilizing under the guise of 'joint training' operations, and their communications have been much more restricted than normal. I have two units from the Investigative Branch keeping tabs on House Gheer and Thane."
"Both were strong supporters of my grandmother," Tenel Ka noted. Allana finished nursing and curled herself up against her mother's chest.
"Yes, and we've strongly suspected that they were behind the attempted poisoning and murder of the *chume'da*."
Tenel Ka reflexively tightened her grip on her daughter, painfully remembering just how close she had come to losing her.
"Forgive me, I did not mean to bring up bad memories." His voice grew softer as he spoke. It was also a sensitive issue for Gadell who, as a hated new member of the Royal Guard at the time, had been caught up in all the intrigue, and was even a suspect in the poisoning.
"It is in the past," Tenel Ka replied with an even breath. "We both survived and came away stronger because of it. Have your people turned up anything?"
"Nothing."
"The squad I sent to Relephon reports the same," Tenel Ka said, gazing out at the city that now carried her name.
"There is one other thing, Queen Mother. I had also sent a team to Terephon, but have since lost contact with them."
"Terephon, House Galney's territory."
"Yes, and supposedly another ardent supporter of your rule."

Tenel Ka went silent, her mind trying to piece together the puzzle being laid out before her. No matter how she arranged the pieces, however, she just couldn't envision the picture that they formed.
"You are troubled."
"Wouldn't you be? This plot is too well thought out, yet full of flaws," Tenel Ka said slowly. "Too complicated, yet simple at the same time. The contradictories are infuriating. If the entire Heritage Council is complicit in this, that is the planetary forces of six of the most prominent noble houses and their subsidiaries. At the moment, in the state our forces are in, they have a high chance of succeeding if they launch an all-out coup. They don't need the Corellians. In fact, to bring them in is wholly baffling. Even if they succeed in dethroning myself, they would then have a massive Corellian fleet in Hapan space, as well as the political unrest my dethroning would cause. It doesn't make sense."
"The *chume'doro* can arrest the families of the Heritage Council to nip this in the bud," Gadell suggested, using the Hapan word for Royal Guard. "They still have the ability to arrest without warrant or cause, still have the right to assassinate threats to your throne."
"No," Tenel Ka shook her head. "No matter how bad things get, I will not use my grandmother's tactics."
"Doing things the hard way again, huh, Tenna?"
"Gadell," Tenel Ka said, making her exasperation clear.
"Just checking," the shrug in Gadell's voice just as clear. "I've mobilized the surveillance forces throughout the city, the remaining investigators are focusing on new arrivals within the past month or so. By your order, I can also lock down the palace so only those approved by the *chume'doro* can enter. It won't help if the Corellians suddenly show up in orbit and bombard the area, but it will keep any Heritage Council agents locked down for the near future."
Tenel Ka kept her face impassive, balancing the security needs of herself and Allana with the many other intangibles that came with being a Queen Mother. "No. We must keep the palace open, to maintain appearances. As Queen Mother, we must continue to see to the daily needs of our people. Just because there is a very definite threat to our life, does not mean things will get better if we barricade ourselves behind closed doors. *I* will not be the sort of Queen Mother who will so willingly let others sacrifice themselves for me."
"On the other hand, if the assassins succeed, you'll also be a very dead Queen Mother," Gadell replied evenly, all mirth gone from his voice. "Hapes needs you to pull it into the new era. It doesn't need a martyr."

Tenel Ka released a breath. "Very well. A compromise. Limit the number of people per day allowed to attend court. You can make the public excuse as my wanting to spend time with my newborn daughter."
"Too bad Queen Mothers don't get maternity leave," Gadell said laughingly. "It will be done."
"Also, when Captain Espara's team returns, send them to Terephon. Jedi Knight Zekk's unique abilities should help get to the bottom of things. Tell Colonel Hesha Lovette to attach her fleet-group to Captain Espara's team at the same time, I'm sure she would like to see her daughter. If there *are* Corellians at Terephon, I don't want them walking in without support."
"Would you like a cup of tea while I'm at it?"
Tenel Ka sent a death glare to the back of the chair Gadell was sitting in.
"I'll get right on it, *Ereneda,*" Gadell said quickly, using the overly formal address for the Hapan ruler. He made no effort to leave his chair, however, letting a silence lapse. Finally, he spoke again. "Tenna, remember the time we went trout fishing in your grandmother's private river?"
Tenel Ka paused, the memory still clear despite it occurring nearly twenty years ago. "If I recall, you took most of the blame when we were caught, both because you were male and because you were 'acting above your station by consorting with me.'"
"And you got lectured about what a proper *chume'da* should smell like," Gadell chuckled. "I don't think anyone appreciated fish-scented princess Tenel Ka that day."
"You were the one who had me wrestle that giant fish you caught. Didn't you run away in panic?"
"I ran to get help!" Gadell said in his defense. "Anyways, do you remember how we landed that large fish in the first place?"
Tenel Ka's eyebrows shot up as she realized what Gadell was hinting at. At the time, she had stood in the rushing water until the giant fish took her as bait. "You do realize if the rest of the Royal Guard learn of this, you'll definitely get the blame again."
"I figured you were tired of waiting around for something big to happen," Gadell's voice was solemn.
"Make the preparations then," Tenel Ka said calmly. "And wait until Captain Espara's group returns. They're due back later today. We can send them to Terephon afterwards."
"Got it." There was a small click after his final word, and Tenel Ka raised an eyebrow. Disengaging herself from the window, she moved

to the other side of the chair. Rather than see the elite agent of the Royal Guard, there was a single comlink strapped to the back of the chair, and a present wrapped in bright-colored tissue on the seat. A small card attached to the present by a bright red ribbon read, '*For the chume'da.'*

Opening the present, Tenel Ka couldn't help but smile at the stuffed toy Gadell had left behind. With a sigh, she picked up the stuffed, toy fish and tucked it against her sleeping daughter, who reflexively crushed it to her body. The plan Gadell had in mind would no doubt be dangerous, but Tenel Ka knew it had to be done. The longer the threat to her own life remained, the greater the chance Allana could be hurt in the process. At least this way, she'd have *some* control to the threat to her life.

Now all she had to do was trust in the Force and her friends and hope things worked out.

(-(-(II)-)-)

She was in her private chambers when the shuttle carrying Captain Moreem Espara's unit returned to Hapes. Almost immediately, Tenel Ka knew something was wrong. If it wasn't from the extreme guilt pouring from the normally disciplined captain, it was the fear and despair emanating from her twin cousins. She knew at once that Zekk was not on the shuttle and that it hadn't been something that was planned. She mentally reflected on this new development in conjunction with Gadell's report. Two planets supposedly full of supporters of her rule, two places where her people have disappeared. It definitely wasn't a coincidence, the only problem was, what did she do next?

Tenel Ka turned away from the crib and towards her desk to center herself. Displayed a few centimeters above the desk was a triangular-based holo-pyramid showing her friends, past and present, on each face. The side of the pyramid facing her was an image that had been taken during her teenage years on Yavin 8, shortly before the Yuuzhan Vong War had broken out. Jaina, Jacen, herself, Zekk, Lowie, Lusa, Raynar, Lyric, Anakin, Tahiri, and Emteedee, were all smiling at the camera; youthful and innocent. In it, Jacen had a casual arm draped around her waist, while a necklace of fragmented Gort egg sat regally around her neck. Off to the side, Han, Leia, Luke, Mara, Chewbacca, C-3PO and R2D2 were smiling at the young group, proud of what they saw. It had been happier times, less complicated, a time when life had been fun.

As the pyramidal image rotated, the next face turned towards her. It had been taken during the preparation for the ill-fated Myrkr mission. A similar, yet different group of face smiled back; faces of many Jedi no

longer among the living. Eryl, the Hara sisters, Jovan, brave Ulaha, Ganner, even the three Vong-bots were included as a joke on Lando's part to lighten the mood. Alema was there as well, looking rage-filled and determined. Tekli had joined their group of friends too, nearly disappearing as she stood between Lowie and Tesar's much larger bodies. The hurt Raynar was feeling at the loss of Lusa was still apparent in his saddened eyes. And then there was the Solos, herself, Tahiri, and Zekk too, all of them blissfully unaware the turn their mission would take, smiling grimly at the camera. Jacen was different in this image. They all were. No longer carefree, no longer innocent of what death on a massive scale felt like in the Force. The only guardians in the background were Luke, Lando and Tendra, their expressions almost pained as if they knew firsthand what they were sending the young Jedi off too and couldn't bear to watch.

And then came the final face of the pyramid, taken at the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War on Zonama Sekot before everyone had gone their separate ways. Even then, it was evident that everyone's immediate future would be taking off in different directions and it was a bittersweet image. The ring on Tahiri's finger was as obvious as the love on her face for the young man holding her. Jaina appeared in similar state of relieved happiness, Jagged's arms draped around her as she faced the camera with her back pressed against his chest. Not that Tenel Ka and Jacen looked much different. They were standing side by side, his hand clenching her lone hand, with the both of them not inclined to let go anytime soon. They weren't as obvious as the other two couples, but their connection was undeniable, even in the holo-image. Lowie was standing by his cousin Lumpawaroo and Han and Leia on one side, while Tesar stood with his mother and a waving Danni Quee on the other. Zekk and Zindra Daine were seated on a picnic bench, rolling their eyes with a bemused Shaeri and Czalpak at the 'Solo' sextet, and Tekli was next to R2-D2, standing on an ammo crate to ensure she was taller than the astromech. Lando was next to his wife, and they next to Luke, Mara, and the infant Ben. It was also the only image Tenel Ka had of her parents standing side by side and smiling at one and other affectionately, tangible proof that her mother and father loved one and other. She doubted they had even realized that the cameraman had included them in the photo, as the two royals had been in the far background, but their moment together had been captured and it was all that mattered.

The holo-image was of her very odd extended family and group of friends, and one of Tenel Ka's most treasured possessions. Given to her by Jacen before he had departed on his four-year trip of rediscovery, it

had remained on her desk and gotten her through some of her rougher days at court. And now, as it turned back to the image of their teenage selves, it also served as a motivator.
She might not be able to drop everything and rush to Zekk's aid like the Solos would have, but it didn't mean she was completely powerless. She was Queen Mother, and sometimes that position did have its benefits. She walked to the desk at a sedate pace and activated the comlink.
"Jana."
"*Ereneda?"*
"Task several stealth observation probes to begin orbiting *Saf'raire*. I want a complete topological scan and a ground-penetrating radar reading of the uninhabited regions of the moon. Send any findings to myself or Major Gadell."
"*Re ui ruschwen, chume,*" came the response from her super-secretary. *As you wish Queen Mother.* And then Jana added."*Chume*, *Ertansida Espara kai loc….ile Taryn ile Trista."*
"Send them in," Tenel Ka directed, steeling herself as she detected the emotions of the trio.
The doors to her chambers opened, and the three Hapan women stepped in with a solemn and disheartened air. Both Taryn and Trista were expressionless, the turmoil of emotions they were feeling locked away far beyond the reach of anyone else. Right now they were soldiers, the will of the Queen Mother the only thing important. And though Trista might have been able to play that role, lock her emotions away and throw away the key, Tenel Ka could sense that that wasn't the case for Taryn. Her youngest cousin's gray eyes betrayed her, her clenched fists and jaw signs of the torrent of emotion that wanted to burst free.
In the privacy of her chambers, she walked to Taryn's side and placed a comforting hand on the younger woman's shoulders, using the Force to siphon away some of her distress. She then turned to the squad leader and in the calmest voice she could manage, "Report."
"*Ereneda*, I take full responsibility for the failure of the mission," Moreem said stiffly, her head bowed. "We were unable to uncover any evidence of treachery on the part of House AlGray, even if we *know* that they are involved somehow. Everything was *too* perfect, and we were constantly denied access to Ducha AlGray herself so we could not get anything from her. I had tasked Jedi Knight Zekk and his friend Alema Rar to…"
"Alema Rar?" Tenel Ka's head snapped around in surprise.
"You…are familiar with her, *Chume?*"

"Blue Twi'lek, sarcastic, loves to cause trouble, ex-Jedi?"
"That's her," Moreem confirmed.
"Did she say why she was on *Saf'raire*?"
"No, *Chume.* The only thing she did was help Zekk teach us how to fight against a Force sensitive opponent. Said she did not wish for all of us to embarrass the *chume'doro* by being wiped out in a heart-beat."
Tenel Ka's eyes narrowed at that, and she filed that away for future reference. "Continue with your report."
"I tasked Alema and Zekk to track down the Ducha AlGray's location and report back to myself. The last I saw of either of them was when I wished them luck at the airlock of the shuttle. Initial scans of the area they disappeared in reveal nothing, and I could not expend any more resources without drawing suspicion."
"Very well," Tenel Ka nodded. "Considering the circumstances you did…"
"Cousin," Taryn finally managed to get out in a burst of breath, her voice plaintive and full of pain. Her willingness to breach protocol, and the fact that Trista didn't even bother to chastise her sister for it, indicated just how greatly Taryn was suffering.
Tenel Ka looked back to her youngest cousin, caring gray eyes meeting anguished gray.
"Please," Taryn entreated, she was standing stock still, unwilling to break their locked gaze.
Tenel Ka released a deep breath and closed her eyes, reaching out through the Force and across the stars towards the Relephon system. Her bond of friendship with Zekk had endured dark Jedi, insane terrorists, and an intergalactic war; a few star systems weren't going to interfere with that. After a moment, Tenel Ka slowly withdrew, opening her eyes once more.
"He's alive, Taryn," Tenel Ka said softly.
"Alive," Taryn repeated faintly.
"He does not appear to be injured or in any sort of pain," Tenel Ka added. She wasn't going to say that the state of extreme peace she felt from Zekk was unnatural, or that Zekk's Force presence wasn't exactly as it should be. Taryn could do nothing about that, and it would only compound her suffering. "If I were to guess, he is in some kind of deep trance. I do not know his exact location though, but don't count him out just yet. He is a Jedi Knight after all."
Taryn nodded again, her gray eyes shimmering as she bowed her head in silent thanks.

"Any time, cousin," Tenel Ka murmured tenderly, inclining her head towards Trista in permission. While Tenel Ka stepped back, the elder of the twins immediately broke rank and hugged her sister reassuringly.
"The rest of the squad will be relieved to hear that report, *Chume*," Moreem said softly. "Jedi Knight Zekk has earned their respect and care and morale definitely took a hit when we realized he was MIA."
"We have two assignments for your squad, Moreem. One will take place this week, and the other as soon as that mission is done."
"*Feyeon ei,"* Moreem inclined her head obediently. *Command me.*
"By the end of this week, we will be hosting a ball for those who have arrived on Hapes in the past few months. It will be a celebration of the increase in commerce and continued safety of the Hapan Consortium. It will also show the Corellians that we will not be cowed by their acts of aggression."
"*Chume*, no disrespect meant, but you are willingly hosting a ball?"
Tenel Ka smiled with her eyes. "Yes, but do not worry, I have not taken a leave of my senses. Report to Major Vessau and you will learn the details of your mission."
"Understood," Moreem saluted sharply, showing none of the hesitation most Royal Guardswomen considered among the elite would at taking orders from a male. "Trista, Taryn?"
"We'll let the others know," Taryn said confidently, her demeanor and fire in her eyes a complete opposite of what it had been when she entered the room. "By your leave, Queen Mother?"
Tenel Ka inclined her head, relieved to see the life return to both her cousins. Being Queen Mother meant she had precious few friends and even fewer people she could trust. Family *not* plotting her demise was even rarer. Though most Queen Mothers of Ta'a Chume's breed might have executed Taryn and Trista to prevent a possible coup in their name, Tenel Ka knew her cousins were as loyal to her as anyone could possibly be. They would never turn on her, and she wanted to ensure that they were both as content as possible with their lot in life in turn. Unfortunately, being Queen Mother meant very little time for family bonding, and these private briefings were really the only time she could afford to share with them.
Taryn and Trista both bowed low, and then followed Moreem out the room. When the door closed behind them, Tenel Ka released a long breath, decompressing all of the pent of emotions in a rush. The fear for Zekk's safety, the frustration she felt towards the state of Hapes, the anger she felt towards the selfish people trying to destroy the happiness of others purely because of their greed, the pang in her heart from the lack of Jacen's immediate presence. She expelled it all

back into the Force. She couldn't afford those emotions if she wanted to keep her kingdom together.
Looking towards Allana's crib, Tenel Ka instead linked herself to the pure and innocent emotions of the sleeping child. Like a morning breeze after a fresh rain, Allana's presence refreshed her and strengthened her resolve once more. She would fight the fight so Allana wouldn't have to. So that someday Allana could walk out of her bedroom and see her mother and father together at the breakfast table, happy, with no galactic disaster weighing them down.
Tenel Ka clasped her hand to her chest, releasing one last breath. She still had the rest of the day to get through, regardless of whether she was ready for it or not. She gently lifted Allana's sleeping form up from the crib and held the infant to herself, needing the warmth and assurance only her daughter could give her. She focused on the tiny heart beating within her daughter's chest, on her bond with Jacen, still so strong even when he was so many lightyears away. In turn, she wrapped the child up in a bubble of her emotions, ensuring to include her bond with Jacen as well so that Allana would always be able to recognize her father through the Force.
With a resigned sigh, Tenel Ka moved to the chair behind the desk and sat in the room in silence. Exhaling once more, Tenel Ka manipulated a small control panel and initiated a hypercomm call across the stars. The unit was extremely powerful, and extremely expensive, but it could penetrate the heavy radiation of the Transitory Mists, giving her contact with the wider galaxy.
Seconds later, her tiredness disappeared in a silent swooping of elation as Jacen Solo's image appeared above the holo-emitter.
"Tiki," Jacen noted with a lopsided grin. *"Nice of you to call."*
"Thank you for answering," Tenel Ka replied with a quirk of her lips.
"Is that..." A wonder-struck expression appeared on Jacen's face as he noted the sleeping baby.
"Our daughter," Tenel Ka whispered softly, a pang in her chest. The love they felt for each other, but would very rarely speak aloud, sounded loud and clear between the two of them.
"Our daughter," Jacen repeated, one of his hands reaching out in a futile attempt to caress his daughter. When his hand passed through thin air, he seemed to freeze for a moment. Looking away, he took a moment to compose himself and then forced out another smile. *"How has she been?"*
"Sleeping mostly," Tenel Ka answered. "Doctor Morwan assures me that this is normal for a baby. I try to ensure that Allana has my

attention some fraction of every hour I am awake. I may be Queen Mother, but I will not neglect my duties as an actual mother."
"*How have <u>you</u> been?"* Jacen followed up, his concern for her warming her heart. Even mired in galactic politics, she could feel that some part of his mind and heart was always reserved for her.
"I have been…busy, as you no doubt have," Tenel Ka concluded diplomatically.
"That well, huh."
"And your efforts to reform the government?"
"Surprisingly enough, Anakin and I are making some ground," Jacen said. "*We have the politicians eager to get out of Denon before everything collapses, the politicians that want more power, and the politicians that don't want to give up power. We just have to avoid repeating the mistakes that were made when the Galactic Alliance was initially created."*
"Sounds similar to my situation," Tenel Ka commented. "I have nobles who will gain much if they side with me and the reforms. Nobles who will lose power and influence for siding with me and the reforms. And nobles laying low until the dust settles and they know which side will come out ahead. All I have to do is avoid the first Hapan civil war in several centuries, a situation fostered by centuries of cultural regicide and a strong nobility."
"I wonder how many people would appreciate it if I called the Hapan Consortium a microcosm for the greater galaxy." Jacen said with mock contemplation.
"It is good to hear your voice, Jacen," Tenel Ka said softly. "Since having Allana, my perspective on the future has changed greatly, as has my desire to make it as safe as possible for our daughter."
"*Hang in there,"* Jacen said supportively. *"Anakin's working with the Denon Temple and I'm in contact with Dathomir. You should have some support before the week is out. Granted, it's not the starship fleet you could probably use, but it's better than nothing."*
"Support? Both Denon and Dathomir are Jedi Order affiliated institutions. They cannot act without approval of the High Council."
"Trust us," Jacen smiled. *"If things work out the way we're trying to get them to, the results should be a pleasant surprise."*
"I trust you, my dear friend," Tenel Ka whispered, shifting Allana so she could reach out to the hologram of her lover. "Stay safe yourself, Jacen."
"I will. We'll get through this somehow, Tiki. Promise."
Tenel Ka nodded in answer, taking the moment to gently rub their daughter's back.

There was a soft knock on the door to her quarters, and the door opened. Jana slipped inside, and seeing the conversation in progress, bowed apologetically. "*Chume,* your afternoon court session is to begin in another ten minutes. Major Vessau has cleared those attending."
"Well, I must go," Tenel Ka said reluctantly, once again committing to memory Jacen's face and drawing upon their bond to strengthen her resolve.
"I should go too," Jacen said, seemingly just as reluctant to end the conversation. *"Early morning tomorrow with one of the senate committees. I'm trying to get them to support my mom for her run for Chief of State, <u>without</u> giving them too much in return."*
"I wish you luck then. Good night, my love."
"*Good night, Tiki. Thank you again for giving us our daughter."*
Tenel Ka nodded once more, not trusting her voice at the moment. With a swift movement, she ended the call and stood. She handed Allana off to Jana, who cradled the infant protectively and returned her to her crib.
"I'll take care of her, my Queen."
"Thank you, Jana." Tenel Ka inclined her head. With years of practice, she abandoned the persona of Tenel Ka 'mother of a baby daughter and lover of Jacen Solo' and stepped out into the hallway as Tenel Ka 'Queen Mother of sixty-three star systems'.
(-(-(III)-)-)
"Hapes recognizes that your House is older and has seniority when it comes to trade deals within the Consortium, but that no longer applies to deals made with Bothawui," Tenel Ka said coolly from her throne. It was two days after Captain Espara had returned from her mission, a day before the ball, and it was business as usual in the Hapan Court.
"The Clan Askar of Dressel wishes to give permits for mining in their system in exchange for the genetically modified grain seeds developed by House Silas of Baldavia. As you are no doubt aware, Dressel suffered Yuuzhan Vong occupation during the war and currently is in a state of recovery. They may have need of your rare-metals in the future, but their people cannot subsist on metal during their current drought."
"But Your Majesty, my House was in line for those mining permits before House Silas committed a grave breach of protocol and involved themselves in the deal," the offended House's representative protested. "Their offer to the Bothans was against Hapan customs and was far beyond their station to do so, therefore the deal is null and void. They have not only insulted the throne by violating the code of

honor maintained over the past few millennia, but they have also insulted my House and I demand satisfaction."
Tenel Ka stared the representative into silence with an icy glare. "And as we have said in the past, we will no longer allow duels between nobles simply because of 'hurt feelings.' Instead of complaining about the deal lost, we recommend you think about the opportunity the deal now represents for both your Houses."
"Opportunity?" The representatives from both Houses looked to each other almost incredulously.
"Yes," Tenel Ka fought to keep her voice level and her face impassive. *Force these nobles were worse than children sometimes.* "As we have said previously, once Dressel's agricultural issues are dealt with, they will then be in a better position for you to offer any technological aid. We would suggest allying your two great Houses, combining resources so that instead of fighting over the short-term benefits, all of Hapes will benefit in the long run."
"The tradition…"
"Hapes has survived on tradition for a very long time," Tenel Ka cut off the representative. "But the times are no longer what they once were. We must also learn to respect the tradition and culture of the allies we will soon gain. Not everyone will be knowledgeable of Hapan tradition, of our rich culture. Just like we would be ignorant of their ways. It is time that Hapes learns to adapt to the changing of the times. Yes, your House may have seniority over House Silas, but in the end, does that really matter? Will you truly cling to titles and tradition even if it means your House stagnates and is left behind? That is not to say that we will completely abandon what it means for us to be Hapan, but we have to redefine the definition of Hapan as we enter a new and uncharted era for our people."
The two representatives looked to each other again, looking slightly less dubious than before.
"The Queen Mother is wise," Representative of House Silas bowed low. "If House Taripan is open to joint negotiations, we will welcome any advice your older House has to offer."
The other representative likewise bowed to Tenel Ka, before nodding to his counterpart. The two then moved off to the side to continue their discussions in private.
"Now presenting to the *Ereneda*, a delegation from the foreign world of Dathomir," the herald announced.
Tenel Ka stirred in surprise, looking up to see a group of twelve robed and hooded individuals pass through the doors of the Lorell Hall and into the audience chamber. The crowd fell silent as nobility from all

corners of the Consortium watched the silent approach of the robed figures. All twelve were warriors in their stance, their posture straight and their feet moved together in unison. The twelve stopped at a respectable distance from her throne and knelt as one.
"Queen Mother Tenel Ka of Hapes, your mother sends you her welcome and tidings," the leader of the twelve said, removing her hood.
"You are… Jedi Knight Sanola Ti," Tenel Ka said, recognizing the teenage Jedi and supposed 'heir' to the Dathomiri Jedi Praxeum.
"I am honored you recognize me," Sanola nodded once.
"Is my mother well?" Tenel Ka asked, still trying to find out why twelve Jedi Knights from her mother's academy would be before her.
"Perhaps, Queen Mother, this might explain it," Sanola reached into her robes and pulled out a holo-emitter. She set it down on the floor in front of her and the image of Teneniel Djo rose up.
"*I, Jedi Master Teneniel Djo, with the full support of Jedi Master Streen and Jedi Master Kirana Ti, and the members of the Jedi Praxeum of Dathomir, hereby declare the Jedi Praxeum of Dathomir independent of the Jedi Order. No longer will our Knights and Apprentices answer to the summons of Denon or the remainder of the Jedi Order. Though we will continue to work with the Galactic Alliance fleets, we reserve the right to recall our people and negotiate new terms with the Galactic Alliance senate. We are Jedi first and foremost, not politicians, not soldiers meant to fight a war for politicians. That is why, from this moment forth, the Jedi Praxeum of Dathomir has decided to forge its own path separate from the one being created by the Jedi Masters on Denon and Ossus. No longer will our actions reflect the will or opinions of the mainstream Jedi Order, nor should their actions define our ways. We will bring peace and prosperity to this galaxy our own way, without the shackles of bureaucracy and corruption that have brought this galaxy to a stand-still. I speak for all of the Jedi Praxeum of Dathomir as I once again repeat our independence from the Jedi Order."*
The silence in the room was deafening. Even Tenel Ka could not stop the surprise from showing on her face.
"This was just broadcast to the Galactic Alliance Senate a few minutes ago, and Jedi Master Kirana Ti has excused herself from the High Council," Sanola said carefully."The first act of the independent Jedi Praxeum of Dathomir was to send my unit to Hapes."
"Your unit?" Tenel Ka eyed the other eleven members.
"Yes, Queen Mother. Five others are Dayclan, the other six are Nightclan allied with the Singing Mountain and Jedi Praxeum. We are to serve you until you no longer have need of us."

"Very well, my attendants will show you to your quarters and we will meet with you all later."
"Queen Mother, may I approach?" Sanola said quickly.
"You may."
The younger woman slowly approached the throne, then leaned in to whisper to Tenel Ka. "Jacen Solo sends his regards. Jedi Knight Mallie Marek is also en route with a team of Jedi from the Denon Temple under the guise of negotiating more Hapan aid for the reconstruction efforts in neighboring systems. They will be here tonight."
"Jacen Solo," Tenel Ka allowed a wry smile to cross her features as she shook her head. So this is what he had meant by a surprise. In a louder voice she gestured. "Hapes welcomes you and hopes the accommodations will be to your liking. We look forward to further cooperation between the people of Dathomir and Hapes."
"As do we, Queen Mother," Sanola took a step back to rejoin her unit.
Tenel Ka fought the urge to roll her eyes. Sure, she might not have a new fleet to combat the Corellians with, but she definitely wouldn't turn away a squad of Jedi. She could easily imagine the turmoil her mother's announcement would create in the capitol. After all, with Corellia and now Dathomir defecting, it looked as if the Jedi Order was fast losing control of its own people. Her thoughts turned to Jacen, sensing him work with his brother to systematically change the broken galactic government. With a skill honed from years of practice, Tenel Ka regally tilted her head and gestured for the herald to bring in the next group.
She'd leave the galactic politics to the Solos, Hapan politics was more than enough for her.
(-(-(IV)-)-)
It was a private dinner affair, if one could call a dinner with twelve visiting Jedi and twelve members of the Royal Guard a private affair. Fortunately, the dining room already came with an unnaturally long table, so fitting everyone wasn't an issue.
Gazing back and forth between the two sides, Tenel Ka assumed that her mother must have developed a sense of humor while on Dathomir. Sanola was the only female of an otherwise all-male team of Dathomiri Jedi. An all male team of physically attractive, intelligent young male Jedi who radiated power and confidence.
"I think I need to have a talk with your mother," Isolder sighed, obviously reaching the same conclusions as his daughter.
"My mother did warn you all that Hapan prejudices towards the male gender were more overt than those on Dathomir?" Tenel Ka looked to

the male Jedi sitting on her right. He had been introduced as Rajade, a half-zabrak from a male-dominant clan.
"I think it's why she filled our unit with men, Queen Mother. The former Queen Mother wanted to give the nobles who gave her a hard time a headache," Rajade replied politely. "Don't worry, we Dathomiri are tough characters. We won't start crying at the first insult we hear, or fly off the handle when our manhood is questioned."
A snort across the table indicated that Rajade's deadpan humor had at least one fan.
"So, what do you think of Hapes so far?" Chiri Aros said conversationally.
"Let's put it this way. If our team hadn't been zipping from one side of the galaxy to another putting out hotspots, all the glitz and glamour would probably have overwhelmed us."
"Oh?" Irina tilted her head questioningly.
"No offense, Queen Mother, *chume'doro*, but compare to some of the other places we've seen and work in, this place is definitely backwards. And that's saying something considering the twelve of us were born and raised in caves and tribal communities."
"Backwards?"
"Backwards," confirmed another male Jedi, his tribal tattoos immediately designating himself as a Nightbrother. It was probably why he ignored the warning tone of Beyele's voice. "By keeping half of your population restricted to menial tasks and by practicing institutional level gender discrimination, you are both weakening yourself and lowering your potential. The fact that this practice is considered one ordained by your deities only furthers the backwards thinking of the Hapan people."
Sensing where the conversation would end up, Tenel Ka spoke up. "*After* we finish our meal, maybe Captain Espara's unit can show the Jedi the sparring rooms. It would behoove both your teams to see how the other fights considering the plans in place for tomorrow's ball."
"An excellent suggestion, daughter," Isolder remarked, sharing Tenel Ka's amuse twinkle in his eyes. "In the meantime, I will contact Dathomir and express the throne's warmest thanks for the Jedi reinforcements."
Nearly the entire table fought back smiles at his statement, and the tension was defused for the time being.
"So, Jedi Ijun," Hiana Roh spoke up, her voice in its customary soft tones as she addressed the Jedi across from her. "Your unit has been throughout the galaxy?"
"Yes, ma'am."

"What is it like?"
"Like?" the black-haired human tilted his head in confusion. He stood out among the Jedi in that he had arrived on Hapes with a Chiss maser sniper rifle strapped to his back and a Kalish warmask covering his face. Where he had gotten both was anyone's guess, but given the nature of the Chiss and Kalish, they definitely meant that some sort of tale of daring was involved.
"I have never been outside of the Transitory Mists," Hiana clarified, her statement somehow silencing the other small talk at the table. "I probably never will as my duty is to Hapes and her people. I have seen holos of course, and heard tales from the soldiers who fought in the war, but I myself have never traveled beyond the veil of the mists. I have, however, never passed up a chance to learn about the galaxy through the eyes of another."
Ijun seemed to go quiet in thought. "One difference is quiet obviously the darkness." He said after a moment. "I notice even now, the skies of Hapes shines from the Transitory Mists. Most of space outside, however, is a dark, cold place. The people have the same flaws wherever you go, however. Greed and power the strongest of motivators for most corners of the galaxy. There are pockets that are at peace, but since there is no trouble, my unit is never called to those areas. Like your team, I suppose, we are called to take on the worst this galaxy has to offer, see the darker side of a thriving civilization so rich in culture and history. The galaxy can be a very lonely place and it is very easy to lose one's self, to lose your compassion and ability to care, after staring at the void for so long. Other than that, the galaxy is similar to Hapes. It has systems working with and against each other. It has people set in their ways and unwilling to change no matter the cost. It has people trying to change and being ridiculed for it. One benefit seeing the galaxy has had on both the Day and Nightclans of Dathomir is that it helped us to realize how petty our struggles against one and other were. Only a few years after the integration of the first Nightclans, and the civil war that had been waged for centuries is practically over. We now have to guard against the corruption of the outside, to ensure our morals are not compromised in the face of everything thrown our way."
"Then it sounds as if Hapes will soon mirror your world," Hiana replied evenly. "We are currently fighting amongst ourselves, destroying ourselves for reasons rooted in ideology and power. With the doors opening to the outside galaxy, perhaps we too will see the infantile nature of our conflict and learn to grow."

"That is what Master Teneniel Djo hopes as well," Jedi Knight Ijun inclined his head respectfully.
"And is that what *you* hope?" Hiana asked in turn.
"I would not wish ill on any people," Ijun said carefully, flicking startling blue eyes up from his meal to hold Hiana's equally blue gaze. "It is my hope, however, that our two peoples can grow and learn together so that both Dathomir and Hapes can prosper. So that others in the galaxy can look to our success and emulate it."
"You have been on this world for all of a few hours?" Hiana commented. "Yet you wish us success as well?"
"I am a Jedi, but I am only one person," Ijun replied evenly. "The more allies we have in keeping order, the more peaceful this galaxy will become. Our team leader has us make contacts with the inhabitants of a local system to aid us in our endeavors. Instead of going in and attempting to tackle the problem ourselves, we assist those most vested in the issue to bring an end to the issue in a way that satisfies as many people as possible. The same applies to here. When this… issue, is brought to an end, hopefully Dathomir and its Jedi will have one more ally against the ever present darkness and chaos this galaxy brings to bear."
"And that's why we let Ijun do the talking," Rajade said in a low voice to Chiri.
"I see," Chiri chuckled softly.
"He did miss one thing though," Rajade said, as Ijun and Hiana continued their conversation.
"Oh?"
"One of the reasons why we accepted the mission here knowing your people would probably hate our guts for being male is because, in a way, we're used to it. Dathomir, Hapes, very similar culturally. And… despite all the other places in the galaxy we've been zipping to, even these past few hours here, I've felt more at home than ever."
"Truly?" Chiri said, eyes widening.
"Yeah, but then I open my eyes and see these massive windows and palaces and stuffy clothes, and I remember I'm on another planet," Rajade replied with a smirk.
The rest of the dinner continued without incident, light laughter and conversation continuing across the table as the two sides mingled. At the far end of the table, Sanola Ti was engaged in a discussion with Major Vessau about small-unit tactics. Lieutenants Lovett and Beyele were talking with a Nightbrother and Dathomir Jedi about differences in Force abilities and philosophies. While Taryn and Trista had started a conversation of their own with a pair of Nightbrother twins. Of course

not everyone was talking, but from the amused and bemused expressions of the non-participants, it was evident they were enjoying the atmosphere as well.
Despite her earlier misgivings, Tenel Ka shook her head in disbelief. "If someone told me this would happen, I would have assumed that they were trying one of Jacen jokes."
"Looks like your mother isn't completely done with Hapes just yet," Isolder muttered back in a low voice.
"She's not supposed to declare independence and then turn around and use the Jedi Praxeum as a dating service for *my* Royal Guard," Tenel Ka retorted under her breath.
"You object? Think about it in a practical sense, daughter. If any offspring does come from the union of Dathomiri Jedi and Hapan *Chume'doro*, the next few generations of *Chume'doro* will be capable of using the Force and thus better able to protect your daughter, my granddaughter. Isn't that why you and Jacen were trying to set up your friend Zekk with Taryn?"
"We were doing it so both could find happiness," Tenel Ka shook her head. "I despise manipulating my friends and family for selfish reasons. I already trust Captain Espara's squad with my life, I will not manipulate them any further."
"Don't fret. Things worked out for your mother and I in the end, we found happiness and had you."
Tenel Ka looked dubious.
"Besides, how is this any different than the treaty you made with Onderon? Your nobles will be inter-marrying and strengthening ties between your two worlds. This will be more of the same."
"Father."
"Yes?"
"I really hate politics."
"As do I, daughter," Isolder nodded sympathetically. "But you are doing an excellent job nonetheless."
"Thank you." Tenel Ka breathed. Her personal comlink blinked on, signaling the arrival of the second group of Jedi. "Jedi Mallie Marek has arrived. I will leave this dinner to your capable hands, father."
"Great," Isolder muttered back. "Leave me in a room full of young adults where you can almost see the hormones bouncing. Lovers *and* fighters. I'm not as young as I once was, Tenel Ka."
"But you'll do an excellent job nonetheless," Tenel Ka replied with a small smile.
"Thank you," Isolder said drolly. "Go on, greet the other Jedi. I almost feel sorry for all the assassins we're inviting to the palace tomorrow."

"Fact, it will definitely be an interesting day."
(-(-(V)-)-)
Banners were strewn, tapestries displayed, and all manner of decadent elegance shown as the celebratory festivities kicked off under the light of the afternoon sun. From all corners of the Consortium and every city of Hapes, noblemen and women, business men and women, and those newly arrived on Hapes itself, mingled about. Dance troupes took their turn entertaining the crowd with ribbons, batons, and intricate footwork, while traditional music played. Depending on where one was in the palace, the music was either a soothing rhythmic beat, uplifting spritely melody, or full of energy and zeal. Waiters and waitresses circulated the crowd with snacks and drinks while the din of a multitude of conversations rose up.
For all appearances, the celebration of Hapan economic and social recovery was a hit. Tenel Ka made her rounds through the crowd, politely listening to those brave enough to approach her before moving on to another group of business people or nobles.
"Why yes, Corulag would be more than willing to entertain trade negotiations should you receive the Queen Mother's approval," Jedi Knight Mallie Marek could be heard saying, surrounded by a group of merchants. Though the merchants were talking in their native tongue, as was most of the crowd in attendance, Mallie's Jedi abilities allowed her to communicate without any trouble. "The galaxy knows little of Hapes outside of her navies, so any Hapan artifacts at this time will certainly fetch a premium price in the galactic market."
"Truly?" A Hapan merchant asked, credits practically shining in his eyes.
Mallie nodded with a tight-lipped smile. "Of course, but Corulag will not dare go behind the Queen Mother's back. You should probably clear it with her first."
"Naturally," the merchant nodded fervently.
Tenel Ka and Mallie exchanged wry smirks, and the red-haired queen continued on through the ballroom.
"Have you heard the about the sordid matter with the Corellians?" Another noble mock-whispered to those listening to her.
"Indeed, indeed. We are fortunate to have a Queen Mother strong enough to confront them head on," a noble in the group nodded, pitching his voice just a bit higher when he noticed Tenel Ka walking past.
"It's dreadful for business though. How am I supposed to convince the merchants of Jodaka to export that scrumptious crab-sauce they make

if they're terrified that Corellian marauders will intercept them?" a third chimed in."
"I know, can you imagine the difficulties of getting R-Ten replacement parts out from Lovola? The prices went up ten-fold after that incident with the Relephon Moons. The merchants want a guarantee that they'll be safe from Corellian intrusion."
Tenel Ka passed through the open veranda doors and out into the royal garden. It was occupied by others still, all who greeted her with polite bows or nods as she walked by. The formal part of the ball would not get underway until sun-down, but the multitude of Hapans wanting to curry her favor by appearing at the time she declared had filled the palace.
"I know I've been wary of making treaties with outsiders," a low-level minister of trade discussed with a group of nobles and merchants. "And with good reason. If we start making treaties with outsiders, we'll be dragged into their problems and be obligated to assist them. You have to admit that the Heritage Council's stance of isolationism makes sense. Hapes does not need the outside governments to be successful. We give fifteen percent of our credits to outsider systems, credits that could have gone into rebuilding our navy."
"But you saw what happened when we tried to go it our own last time," another countered. "The Yuuzhan Vong nearly destroyed us and if it wasn't for the New Republic ships Hapes might have been lost. This galaxy is a lot bigger than Hapes, the Queen Mother has been saying that for years now."
"And now we're being destroyed by outsider problems," the junior minister retorted, gesturing with his wine tumbler. "Would this issue with the Corellians even have occurred if the previous Queen Mother hadn't opened the doors to the rest of the galaxy?"
Tenel Ka decided to speak up. "But this issue *has* occurred Junior Minister Feroer. As much as you might want to, we cannot go crawling back into our corner of the galaxy now that the doors have been open. The more we retreat, the more lost ground it creates, and the more the outsiders can take that ground uncontested. They are no longer unaware of Hapes and the riches we have, so we must do our best to manage our relations on our terms, not theirs."
"That is all well and good, Your Majesty," Feroer tilted his head in concession. "But it is hard to ignore the numbers. With respect, more Hapans have died from acts of violence in the reigns of you and your mother than all the other Queen Mothers combined. Ta'a Chume had the sense to stay out of the conflict between the Republic and the Confederacy, and the subsequent insurrection against the Empire.

Hapes survived, grew strong, our fleets safe-guarding our territory. No one cared about us because we did not involve ourselves in their affairs. Since you became Queen Mother, all Hapes has seen is strife, death, and diplomatic quagmires that drain our coffers and make us weak."
"That's not fair, Feroer," one of the other nobles protested. "The Yuuzhan Vong War was something completely out of the Queen Mother's control."
"Was it?" Feroer countered, slightly red-faced. He downed his tumbler of wine and traded the empty glass for a new one as a waiter walked by. "The Yuuzhan Vong would have left us alone had we only handed over the Jedi. I lost almost my entire family at Fondor, and instead of bringing their killer to justice, bartering his life for peace, the Queen Mother pardons him and plunges our Consortium into a cycle of death and destruction. When the Yuuzhan Vong invaded Hapes, what was left of my family died! All because of the Queen Mother and her mother's inability to rule Hapes as they should have! And now the daughter makes the same mistake with Corellia, and all we'll have is more death and destruction. I guess I never should have expected anything less from the spawn of a murderous Dathomiri Jedi witch."
"Feroer!" Barked one of his companions, looking at Tenel Ka fearfully. "She's still the Queen Mother! Queen Mother, our apologies, he's obviously had too much to drink. I'm sure he will send a formal apology when he recovers."
"Junior Minister Feroer is entitled to his opinions," Tenel Ka said emotionlessly. "And there is some truth to his words. Not a lot, but some. I will leave him to your care then?"
"Yes, of course," the companion cuffed Feroer in the back of the head, and the junior minister slumped unconscious before his mouth could get him into any more trouble.
Tenel Ka stepped away from the group and continued to make her rounds through the royal garden. When that task was finished, she walked to the top of a grand staircase that marked the boundary of the palace grounds, and leaned against the basalt banister. Stretching out below her was the distant city of *Tenel Ka Chume'Dan* glimmering in the afternoon light.
"Tenna," Gadell Vessau casually leaned on the low wall at a respectable distance away, yet still at her side.
"Gadell," Tenel Ka acknowledged. "Is all well?"
Gadell joined her in scrutinizing the city below. "How do you really want this night to go, Tenna? Royal Intel is pretty sure a band of our guests will make a break for one of the palace armories shortly after

the formal dinner commences. We can apprehend them beforehand under the power given to the *Chume'doro,* but they will not have committed any real crime and we might spook off any other conspirators we haven't tagged yet. If we do let them raid the armory, however, it is doubtful that any of the guards on duty will survive, and weapons in the assassins' hands won't bode well for anyone."
Tenel Ka closed her eyes, letting the afternoon sun beat on her as she sought out an answer through the Force. If she posted no guards, then the assassins would undoubtedly be suspicious and abandon their plans as well. Yet, she couldn't just sacrifice some of her protectors for the sake of the plan. "We have two squadrons of YVH-Two type security droids from Tenandro Arms, do we not?"
"They are being used to secure the outer perimeter and the throne room."
"Reassign them to the armory and move the armory guards to the perimeter."
"Just the perimeter?"
"For the assassins to raid the armory, they must be confident in their ability to bypass the security protocols. Some, if not all of the security team for tonight might be compromised. We would be foolish to reassign them to the throne room given what will occur."
"Got it."
"And Major Vessau."
"Yes, Queen Mother?"
"Try to survive the night as well."
"No promises," Gadell tilted the brim of his ceremonial hat and disengaged himself from the railing. "You try to stay alive, *Chume.* I don't have to tell you the hell that will be raised if you so much as break a single fingernail in this?"
"No." Closed her eyes, the events that would soon unfold playing out in her mind in many different ways. One way or another, whatever might happen, there would be a very obvious shift in power within the Consortium. For better or worse. She opened her gray eyes to find Gadell had disappeared back into the crowd, so she instead glanced sidelong at the distant sun.
The night couldn't come soon enough.
(-(-(VI)-)-)
Tenel Ka briefly wondered how history would remember the night as she strode up to the podium to make her speech. General Livette had confirmed that nearly all of the enemy agents on Hapes were present within the palace. Most of the ones identified but hadn't come were about to be hunted down by *Chume'doro* elimination units, so that the

entire network would be taken out in a single moment. A few would be kept alive and unmolested, of course, so their movements and contacts could be recorded. But it still didn't change the fact that she had deliberately opened the doors of her palace to nearly a thousand known enemy combatants, all who wanted to kill her and her daughter.
The din in the dining hall quieted as the spotlights focused on her, the bright beams of light causing her tiara of sixty-three dazzling gems to sparkle and flash. Her expression was the complete opposite of her rapid beating heart and sweaty hand. The moment she had stepped up, she felt the threat in the Force loud and clear. In an odd moment of delirium, she wondered if the assassins would be kind enough to let her finish her speech before attacking. Her lips stretched in a tight smile, her gray eyes swept the dining tables and the multitude of guests staring back at her. In another moment of morbidity, she wondered how many of them would be alive by the time the sun rose.
"We are all Hapan," Tenel Ka began, the holocamera beaming her speech throughout the Consortium floated in the distance. "We are our greatest enemy and greatest ally. Only Hapans should decide the future of Hapes, only Hapans can choose whether we stand united or divided in the face of an increasingly complicated galaxy. Only Hapans can choose whether to let our selfish desires for power, for wealth, for status, destroy the success we could have if we only work together. When my grandmother opened the doors to the galaxy she did so with the intention of ushering in a new era for Hapes, of saving Hapes from herself. Yes, the outside galaxy might be intimidating to many, the unknowns greater than the known. But we know that our people are not cowards, are not afraid to face new challenges head on. Under my mother we endured the hardship of the Yuuzhan Vong War, inviting strangers with nowhere to go into our homes. And we were stronger for it.
As one, Hapes will grow stronger if we only acknowledge that there is more to this galaxy than us. Otherwise, we will stagnate, forever caught in our own self-destructive nature, ignorant by choice over the opportunities that lay beyond the Transitory Mists. As the treaty with Bothawui already shows, those opportunities are many and can only benefit all Hapans. As the threat of the Yuuzhan Vong and now Corellia has shown, there will be those envious of Hapes and the stability we have. To face an outside threat, we need outside allies, and to obtain them, Hapes must bravely venture into the unknown. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. And with knowledge, a new light will shine from Hapes once more."

The considerate assassin chose that moment to fire, the flash of light flaring against the protective ray-shield emitted from the podium. A split second later, the Hapan counter-sniper retaliated, and chaos filled the dining room.
The crowd panicked, all of them rushing for the exits. In the process, someone decided to lob a thermal detonator in her direction. With lightning quick reflexes, Tenel Ka grabbed hold of the device with the Force and pitched it out the window behind her. The resulting explosion shattered the entire window and caused the crowd to scream in terror. Her security team quickly swarmed her and began to usher her towards the nearby exit.
Immediately, a group of two-dozen individuals pulled out blasters of varying types and took aim. The Hapan counter-sniper, as well as the Dathomiri Jedi Ijun and the Hapan Sergeant Roh, opened fired in rapid succession. The blue maser beam of Ijun's rifle disintegrated one of the assailants before his blaster had even cleared the holster. Sergeant Roh's plasma projectile took off the head of another. While the Hapan counter-sniper's standard laser dropped a third. Before two of the three bodies could hit the ground, the snipers had already taken out their second targets and forced the remaining assailants to scramble for cover.
"It looks like we were successful," Gadell muttered, pushing Tenel Ka through the hallway.
An explosion sent bits and pieces of the stone wall ahead of them flying in a storm of deadly shrapnel.
"Perhaps too successful," Tenel Ka said, as another group of assassins pushed through the hole they made and into the hallway. Her security team immediately engaged them, leaving Gadell to escort her down another path. The sound of a pitch blaster fight echoed behind her, and Tenel Ka grimaced.
A second security unit of five people was directed to meet up with them, and Tenel Ka acknowledged the two Dathomiri Jedi and members of Captain Espara's squad with grim tilts of her head.
"Time to get to the safe-room," Gadell said grimly.
"Major, we will not hide away while…"
"*Chume,* if you are injured in the fighting…"
"Will you have us hide while those defending my rule die in our place?" Tenel Ka challenged. "Take us to the security control room and we will coordinate the counter-attack from there."
Gadell clenched his jaw and nodded once. "Fine."
"We'll take point," squad leader Lieutenant Lovett acknowledged.

They rounded another corner and were about to advance through an atrium, when they nearly had themselves blasted to pieces by a Merr-Sonn rocket. Fortunately, the two Dathomiri Jedi held out their hands and sent the rocket flying back the way it came. Unfortunately, the rocket-firing assassin had lots of help. A hail of blaster fire bore down through the hallway, and the group was forced to duck back behind the corner.
"Ideas?" One of the Jedi asked.
"I have one," Chiri Aros said with a smirk. "Brought it with me for days like this. I'll need the rest of you to cover me, however."
Corporal Aros slung the pack she had been carrying to the ground and rapidly assembled what could only be described as a very big gun. A very, very, very big gun. Eyes grew round at the sheer length and size of the weapon. The singular barrel was almost as long as the corporal was tall, and thicker than her muscular arm. A thick set of wires ran from the back of the weapon and into a heavy duty backpack. If that alone didn't emphasis the weapon's weight, two handles were needed to support the weapon, in addition to a waist strap and a shoulder strap.
The blond warrior woman ignored their incredulous stares as she slid her arms through the straps of a backpack containing some sort of power-source, before hefting the very large gun and sliding *its* straps over one shoulder and around her waist. Like most Hapan women, she was slightly bulkier than an average human woman, and taller too, so she had no trouble holding up the weapon for others to see.
"Is that a stripped-down turbolaser cannon?" One of the Jedi blinked in shock.
"From a Battle Dragon," Chiri's grin was predatory, the woman smirking at the stunned expressions of the two Jedi. The weapon whined audibly as she charged it up, and the capacitors within her large backpack lit up a pale-yellow hue in the dim hallway. "Like my gun?"
"And you wonder why you can't get a quality man, corporal," Lovette rolled her eyes and readied her blaster rifle. "They never like it when you have a bigger gun than they do."
"On my mark," the Dathomiri Jedi gestured back to the atrium. "Go!"
The two Jedi stepped out first, redirecting another rocket and then activating their lightsabers to parry the storm of red and green lasers. Ria and Lovett let loose an indiscriminate spray of blaster fire, forcing most of the assassins to flinch or get behind cover.
And then Chiri stepped out with her turbolaser cannon fully charged. The weapon, normally used to destroy starfighters and punch holes in

capital ships, was never designed to be used on infantry in an enclosed space. Without any warning, Chiri unleashed a nightmarish storm of energy that drowned out the incoming fire. The fact that the massive weapon was designed to absorb any recoil meant that Chiri was free to fire to her heart's content. The fact it was a Hapan turbolaser meant it could fire in rapid succession at a rate much faster than an average turbolaser. Lasers, bigger than an average human, shrieked out of her cannon and blew apart the marble and basalt columns and stairwell; sending rocks and bodies flying everywhere. Assassins vanished in groups of five and ten amid the hail of turbolasers plowing into them, and the remainder frantically tried to scramble for cover. Still the massive lasers demolished everything in their path, superheating the atrium. The nearly hundred or so assailants waiting for them never stood a chance.

When the carnage was finally over, the barrel of Chiri's cannon glowed almost white with heat, the pack on her back depleted, the entire atrium was decimated, and all was deathly silent.

Tenel Ka fought to keep her face impassive as the other members of her security team , Gadell included, stared at Chiri in fearful awe.

"I think the area's clear," Chiri deadpanned. Shortly after, part of the atrium roof collapsed and deposited several tons of debris into the smoking room.

Gadell's comlink beeped. "Go ahead."

"Major, this is Captain Espara. The assassin forces are putting up a strong resistance. Jedi Knight Sanola Ti believes that they are being guided by the Force."

"'By the Force'?" Gadell looked to Tenel Ka in bewilderment, then back to the comlink. "Captain?"

"We had started to push back their initial offensive when they suddenly became much more organized and effective. The palace guard took heavy causalities when the assassins actually managed to surround and cut off a unit back in the ballroom. When our own people began to become disheartened and sloppy, the Jedi from Dathomir realized what was happening. They and the reinforcements from Denon have stepped back from the fighting to counter what they say is something called 'Battle Meditation'. She says that's why we're actually being pushed back in several areas."

"Queen Mother?" Gadell looked to Tenel Ka.

"It's a passive Force ability," Tenel Ka summed up. "Demoralize your enemy and read their movements, tighten up the coordination of your allies and fill them with purpose."

"Queen Mother," this time the voice of Mallie Marek filled the comm. *"The battle meditation, I know the source."*
Tenel Ka was about to ask who, but a sinking feeling in her stomach suddenly caused her to realize the answer. "Zekk."
"Yeah," Mallie's voice was subdued. "*But it's not his Force presence, not completely. It is like there are hundreds of minds behind his efforts. Probably how they can control all the different assassin groups. The Force presence behind Zekk nearly overwhelmed me when I tried to press for answers."*
"Do you think you can locate Jedi Knight Zekk?" Tenel Ka saw the terse expressions on the faces of the three from Moreem's squad.
"I'm heading there now."
"Incapacitate him if you can, but if whoever is using him continues to use him as a conduit for the battle meditation…" Tenel Ka trailed off. "The Palace Guard and Royal Guard have superior numbers, but that will not help them, if the Force is demoralizing them. This has to end quickly."
"I'll take care of it. Hope you don't mind, but I recruited two of your Royal Guard. I figured I might need some back up."
"Which two?" Tenel Ka once again found herself knowing the answer the moment she had asked the question.
"Taryn and Trista."
"May the Force be with you," Tenel Ka breathed.
"And not with the bastard orchestrating this entire thing," Mallie finished. *"I'll contact you when I have results. Marek, out."*
"Where to now?" Gadell asked softly, evidently being able to read her despite her emotionless mask.
Tenel Ka replied by reaching for her Rancor-tooth lightsaber and unhooking it from her belt. "Discover where the fighting is thickest, we'll go there."
"You're the Queen Mother," Gadell said pointedly.
"Precisely," Tenel Ka activated her lightsaber, the green blade lighting up the darkened hallway. Fierce gray eyes bored into Gadell while her crown glimmered in the viridian hues of her saber. "If people are going to fight and die for Hapes, the Queen Mother should be right there fighting alongside them. It is hard to be demoralized when the symbol of what you are fighting for stands shoulder to shoulder with you."
"You're the Queen Mother," Gadell said resignedly, shaking his head. "Control, where is the fighting thickest?"
"Royal Gardens. The assassins somehow managed to commandeer a hover-tank and two small walkers from the Palace Guard garrison.

They flanked the guard unit there and are pressing towards the palace."
Gadell gave Tenel Ka an ever-suffering look before shrugged and holding up his comlink once more. "Tell the guard to hold their ground. Help is on the way."
(-(-(VII)-)-)
"Pull back into the palace!" A panicked voice rang out above the incessant volley of blaster fire. "We're being overrun!"
A concentrated beam of energy fired from the Hapan hovertank plowed through a line of palace guardsmen and sent clods of burnt dirt tumbling through the air. Another blast ripped a whole in the palace wall, and large chunks of masonry fell upon the palace defenders.
"Watch your left, the group of assassins are going to get through!"
"We can't move in time! We're being pinned down by the walkers!"
"Damn it! Where are our heavy weapons?"
The scene in the Royal Garden was chaotic as bloodied and battered defenders tried to hold back a force many times smaller. The fact that they were having trouble when the numbers were clearly on their side did nothing to help their morale. The gardens, which had only a few hours earlier been a place of relaxation and conversation, had turned into a deadly war-zone."
"Damn it! They took out Colonel Arisis! We can't hold the line!"
Assisted by two re-appropriated walkers and a tank, the assassins of the Heritage Council pressed forward without delay. An anti-vehicle rocket team moved into position, but it was as if the assassins had known they were coming. Before they could get set up, a rocket fired by one of the walkers obliterated them.
"Fall back! Fall back!"
The walkers and tank concentrated their fire on a group of Hapans holding their ground. The resulting explosion sent bodies flying and broke the resolve of those nearby.
Just when it looked as if the defenders were going to be overwhelmed, the shriek of a turbolaser flashed out from the depths of the palace. A bright red beam slammed into the cockpit of one of the walkers, followed by two more in quick succession. In another blaze of flame, the only thing left of the walker was its legs. Immediately, the other walker and tank tried to target the source of the attack. But the second walker was lifted up in the air by an invisible grip and dumped unceremoniously onto the top of the tank. The turbolaser shrieked again, pummeling the tank and walker with punishing bolt after bolt of energy. The resulting explosion sent adjacent assassin infantry flying through the air and left only a burning wreck in its wake.

Blaster fire from the assassins began to pour into the hole. But blades of light ignited, and many of the blaster bolts were sent flying back out at the source.
"*Chume*!" A cry went out. Soldiers quickly craned their heads in an attempt to see their ruler.
Seemingly unfazed by the continuous torrent of laser fire heading her way, Tenel Ka Djo advanced out from the ruins of the palace wall, her emerald lightsaber blazing in the darkness of the night. She wasn't alone, as lightsabers from half of the Dathomiri team sliced through the air in a deadly flurry of color and motion. Behind them, Royal Guardswomen opened fire with all manner of weaponry. Rockets, lasers, heated metal slugs, grenades, everything flew over and around the shoulders of the Jedi and bombarded the assailants' position with lethal precision.
Tenel Ka stopped at the front of the defender's formation and made eye-contact with the surviving soldiers. "The fight is not over just yet. It would be an honor to fight alongside such brave soldiers as yourselves."
The soldiers swallowed, then took in a breath as new determination flooded their features. "Lead on, Your Highness."
Tenel Ka nodded in approval, her eyes darting to the attackers. "I sense close to a hundred-and-thirty enemy soldiers left. Take the time to fortify your defenses while we force them back." She paused to bat away a sniper shot. From high above on the palace rooftop, Jedi Knight Ijun fired his maser rifle and took out the offender. "Then when you have recovered, join us."
The tide was quickly turning as the morale of the defenders skyrocketed. The attackers tried to melt away into the night, but suddenly found themselves cut off as three *Miy'til* fighters zipped through the sky and hovered in position.
"Surrender!" Tenel Ka demanded sharply, the Force making her voice echo loudly. "You cannot serve Hapes if you die here tonight."
One of the assassins responded by bringing his shoulder-mounted rocket launcher to bear. The other assailants resumed their assault, blasters blazing.
The Hapan *Miy'til* fighters immediately opened fire, and the remaining attackers promptly disappeared in a barrage of laserfire.
The following stillness was almost unnatural. The defenders could still hear gun-battles taking place all throughout the palace, but the immediate fighting was over.

"*We've broken their lines,*" The voice of Gadell filled the comm-frequencies. "*All units press your attack. Don't give them a chance to run to ground again.*"
"Jedi Knight Marek?" Tenel Ka held up her comlink.
"*I'm here,*" Mallie sounded tired, even over the comlink. *"Taryn and Trista are too. Zekk's been neutralized."*
"Neutralized?" Tenel Ka tried to reach out to sense her friend, but couldn't. "Don't tell me you…"
"*He's alive, only just. He went down fighting,*" Mallie breathed. *"I sent word for a medical team; hopefully they'll get here before we pass out."*
"I'm on my way."
"*No, don't. That Twi'lek, Alema I think it was, she was here too,*" Mallie sucked in a pained breath. *"I don't know where she…"*
There was the sound of a window breaking high above. Tenel Ka and the others in the garden all looked up in alarm, weapons raised. A single figure leaped out the tower window, twisting through the air and landing on one of the *Miy'til* fighters patrolling the area. It was hard to see what was happening given the darkness of the night, but suddenly the fighter began to pitch wildly. The cockpit hatch opened, and in a blur of motion, the pilot was yanked from her seat and hurtled out of her fighter. The shadow that had landed on the fighter assumed the emptied seat and the cockpit closed. In a heartbeat, the fighter angled itself into the upper atmosphere and disappeared from sight.
Fortunately for the pilot, she had been tossed out of the fighter over the Royal Gardens. Unfortunately for her, *Miy'til* fighters didn't come with parachutes of any type, so she had to endure a terror-filled drop through the air. At the last second, however, Tenel Ka caught the pilot in a Force hold, lowering the wide-eyed pilot to the ground without incident.
"I believe I just saw Alema's departure," Tenel Ka reported, her gray eyes staring up at where the fighter had disappeared. "I am making my way to your side now."
Mallie didn't respond, and Tenel Ka could sense the other woman's life-signs grow weaker. She looked to one of the soldiers escorting her through the rubble-filled hallways of the palace. "Get us a status report and casualty list as soon as you are able. We will be assisting Jedi Knight Marek."
"Ma'am," the soldier saluted and hurried away.
Tenel Ka turned to another soldier. "Contact Major Vessau. We need to begin a disinformation campaign as soon as we are able. The assassins were not supported by Heritage Council ships, meaning that this was

just an opening strike. We need to keep the Council guessing for as long as possible to buy Anakin and Jacen Solo more time."
"On it," two others peeled off from her retinue.
"My daughter?" Tenel Ka looked to General Livette as the older woman approached.
"Safe," the General reported. "Jedi Knight Sanola Ti and two other Dathomiri Knights were successful in the defense of her room. It was close, however, this Battle Meditation nearly overwhelmed the defenders in that part of the palace."
Tenel Ka released a breath of relief. "Very well, keep the fleet on standby and be alert for any non-standard communications leaving this planet. The palace will issue an official press release in the morning, so keep everything locked down until then."
"Yes, ma'am," General Livette inclined her head, then stepped away to do as told.
Tenel Ka paused once more, her eyes catching the sight of a room filled with groaning injured. The medics were triaging the wounded the best they could, but the sheer number had caught them off-guard.
"Have some of the doctors from *Tenel Ka Chume'Dan* transported up here to assist the royal surgeons."
"Yes, Your Highness," another hastened to carry out her command.
Walking at a much quicker pace, Tenel Ka did her best to ignore the damage, the pools of blood, and the deceased that littered her palace. As she saw the all too still face of a particularly young soldier carted past on a stretcher, Tenel Ka could only hope that the gains were worth the cost her people had just paid.
She also silently prayed that the price her people would soon pay in the coming war was worth the cost of the future she wished for them.
(-(-(Chapter End)-)-)

Corellia
(-(-(I)-)-)
Jysella did her best to keep herself calm as she reviewed the datapad before her beneath a cloudy gray sky. The cool air brought with it the pleasant scent of trees, and the not-so-pleasant scent of bog gas; one of the downsides to being outdoors on Terephon.
The planet of Terephon, home of House Galney, was a marshy and mountainous world that seemed every bit as wild and untamed as most of the Consortium was; save for the occasional opulent city that towered over the hundreds of thousands of acres of wetlands that surrounded them.

House Galney's primary place of residence, the *Villa Solis,* was not a glimmering palace like AlGray's ancestral home, but a private retreat in the middle of a sprawling moor. This meant that anyone venturing outside the artificially controlled climes of the lodge had their senses acquainted with Terephon's natural state.

At least the weather was mild and the scenery relatively nice for those who liked untouched wildernesses.

Having grown up in a Star Destroyer, in a hidden space station, and then in the center of Coronet Corellia, however, Jysella felt no such kinship to the untamed environment. She was used to her datapads and holoscreens, her instant-food dispensers and technology. She didn't like waking up to the realization that there were perhaps a small family of rodents living in the wall behind her bed, or step outside to get some air and realize that a larger animal had used the front walkway as its lavatory. Sure, when she danced she synced herself to the Force energies of the living things all around her, but a city had its own vibe, its own pulse, with which she had grown used to dancing too. Zir-dan hadn't been joking when she had said that Terephon was a backwater.

But her current choice of residence was not what had Jysella upset. A team of Royal Intelligence agents had been apprehended by Galney security forces, and while their fate was being debated by Corran and the security chief, Siabali Galney made an executive decision and had the agents fed to her hunting Murgs. On top of that, Alema had decided to 'defect' to the Queen Mother's side on Sapphire, and was ignoring Jysella's attempts to contact her. And on top of *that*, apparently Tenel Ka had discovered the Heritage Council's people on Hapes and had put an expiration date on said people; they were either going to be used in three days or rounded up en masse and rendered useless. And by now, that warning was two days old.

Of course, the network of Heritage Council agents had to get in trouble and the Heritage Council ships were nowhere ready to engage the royal fleets. This meant that if the agents were to be saved in any way, Corellia would have to get a lot more involved. Would probably have to *lead* the attack on the Queen Mother's forces rather than act as a supporting role.

Jysella gazed up at the slate gray sky, searching for answers. Not helping matters was the fact that Valin had her doubting herself and their current course of action. He had never been for Corellian intervention in the first place, had never warmed to Alema since her return, and was adamant that Corellia was heading down the wrong path with their current course of action. And Jysella couldn't help but

feel that niggling doubt in the back of her mind that made her wonder if he was right. The longer they stayed in Hapan space, the more convoluted and out-of-control things became. Her time away from Alema had also enabled her to reflect on everything the Twi'lek had done, and Jysella couldn't help but feel that same doubt worm its way into her trust of the older woman she had once saw as a big sister.
It was all so confusing.
A series of barking noises distracted her from her musings, and she looked up to see the House Galney hunting murgs race through moor, a speeder-full of nobles following with hunting rifles in hand.
It was maddening.
The Consortium was about to implode and the only thing these nobles cared about was getting another trophy to mount over the fireplace.
Shaking her head in disbelief, Jysella rose from the tree-stump she had been using as her chair. The fresh air had done little to clear her mind or abate the conflict of her mind and heart.
"Oh, Jedi, I didn't see you!" A startled voice exclaimed.
Jysella glanced over her shoulder to see the groundskeeper of *Villa Solis*, Entora Zar, gazing at her with startled Hapan-gray eyes.
"Lady Zar," Jysella inclined her head politely.
"Please, Jedi Knight Horn, I'm just Entora," the short and squat woman said, sounding embarrassed.
"Sorry, I learned it was better to just call any Hapan I met 'lord' or lady' until corrected," Jysella said with a wry grin. "What brings you out here?"
"My murgs, of course," Entora gestured to the path the nobles in the speeder had taken with a small monitor in her hand. "I've lent them out to Lady Dain and her party. You see, they live in Palva, that's the main city in this hemisphere, and don't have the luxury of a hunting lodge. The ducha leases the land out from time to time to others on Terephon so they can have a bit of sport. Of course, many of them are amateurs and won't know how to care for the murgs if their lives depend on it, so I keep track of things from afar to give them the 'authentic' hunting experience. I'm the only one the Ducha trusts with her affairs, so I make sure things are in tip top shape."
"And you don't really care about the fact that Hapes is nearing a civil war and that we Corellians are helping add to the troubles?" Jysella had to ask, sounding a bit more hostile than she had intended.
"Oh, it is none of my affair, master Jedi." Entora said with a smile that sickened Jysella. "I only do what my ducha tells me, and I support her in return. She has been good to me since I was but a little girl, so it is only right that I return the trust and loyalty she has shown me. If she

thinks that what she is doing is for the benefit of the Consortium, it is not my place to question her."
"Right, of course," Jysella said darkly. "Well, if you'll excuse me."
"Of course," Entora bowed her head politely, then hurried on to catch up with her murgs and the nobles.
Starting to hate the Consortium the longer she was in it, Jysella let out a shout of frustration and kicked a clod of dirt into a bubbling pit of water. She could already hear her father telling her to calm down, to use the Force and let her anger bleed away, and that annoyed her to no end. When she had been a little girl, she had believed that her dad had all the answers. Could wave a hand and solve every problem. He had defeated Sith spirits, Yuuzhan Vong Warmasters, protected her and Valin during a galactic war, he had seemed invincible to her eyes, infallible.
But now, at fifty-four years of age, he just seemed….old. As if he had lived through too much, had given so much of himself to the galaxy and received nothing in return. His hair was graying, wrinkles were slowly lining his face, and he just seemed tired. He couldn't protect her and Valin anymore. She was only twenty years old, and yet she was in charge of important political decisions far beyond her years. He was no longer infallible, no longer capable of solving every problem and sheltering her from the darker side of the galaxy.
Jysella wasn't even sure what she was angry about, why she suddenly felt a feeling of helplessness, as if she had been swept up by the tide of events without any anchor or safety rope. She continued to follow a narrow dirt path, the scent of sulfur and other gases becoming stronger as she headed deeper into the marshlands. The fact that she didn't even know what she was upset about added to her anger. She stomped ahead, her vibe of 'don't bother me' cowing the wildlife around her into silence.
Eventually she found herself in a clearing of sorts. A single land mass surrounded by naturally occurring spouts that emitted intermittent bursts of swamp gas.
With a deep breath, she let out a frustrated scream into the sky, tears blurring the corners of her eyes. Couldn't the galaxy ever give them a break? She whipped out her lightsaber and activated the yellow blade. Running through several katas in an attempt to clear her mind, Jysella stabbed the blade with deep prejudice at invisible foes. With every jab and slice she pretended that she had just felled another one of her problems, had just slain the bad guy responsible for the whole mess so she could go home and be with her family.

One pass of her blade traveled over a bubbling water hole, and the gas emerging from the water ignited in a fiery pillar that lasted for a split second. The sudden flash of heat and wind mirrored Jysella's ire, and without missing a step, her katas transformed into a rage-filled dance. Like a whip, her lightsaber lashed out at the imaginary foes, and as if timed, puffs of gas were released by the swamp. Flares of bluish green, orange, and yellow flashed in and out of existence all around her as she became a whirl of motion. Her heart was pounding. The faint popping and hisses as the gas and air caught fire became her musical accompaniment.

Soon these flares turned into burning ribbons of light that whooshed as they spiraled around her outstretched arms before being released back into nature; her ancestral trait allowing her to manipulate the energy of the flames as one would guide a dance partner. She danced on, the spirals beginning to traverse up and down her entire body like blazing rings, often clashing as different colors intertwined.

Finally, as her anger began to finally burn away, she leaped over a bubbling fountain of muck and gas. Her saber ignited the gas and the resulting explosion sheathed her in cyclone of yellow; as if her very lightsaber had caught fire and was shrouding her in its deadly embrace.

She absorbed the energy. Twisting through the air, with the flames gradually disappearing into her body, Jysella let out one last yell and thrust her hands towards the ground. A cloud of dust and mud shot up into the air when she landed, the stored energy released into the ground with the force of a small missile. Gradually, the dust settled, and Jysella remained where she was, hunch over on all fours and fighting back tears.

She panted heavily in the small crater she had made, the fingers of her free hand curling in the dirt and a fine sheen of sweat coating her forearms and head. Her lightsaber felt heavy in her hand, tear drops wetting the dirt below her face. Steadying her breathing, she deactivated her saber and almost immediately missed the constant hum it had emitted.

It was then she finally realized she had an audience. Several bipedal insect-like creatures as tall as she was were watching from another stable patch of loam a short distance away. Not recalling any insects as large as they were in her briefing of Terephon, Jysella warily took a step back. In turn, they took a step forward, and then another. They felt strange in the Force, as if they were little more than conduits for the Force to move through and not capable of using the Force themselves.

"What are you?" Jysella asked, keeping her lightsaber out. She could feel Force probes through the creatures, but it felt almost alien to her. The Force probe changed, and Jysella realized it was trying to find familiarity with her presence as well. For what, Jysella wasn't sure, and she certainly didn't want to find out. She drew the Force around her as a shield and activated her lightsaber. "Stop that. Only warning. Future reference though, you bugs better not try to get into a girl's head before a first date."

The bugs emitted a series of clicks and clacks with their mandibles. Though Jysella couldn't understand them, she could definitely feel the shift in emotions. They were angry. Very angry. The words 'outlier' and 'disruption' echoed in her head. Only, Jysella realized after deeper examination, the anger wasn't theirs but someone else's being transferred through the odd Force connection the creatures had.

Not that it appeared to matter. The three bugs leaped from their loamy ground and over to her patch of ground with increasingly agitated clicks of their mandibles. The three arrayed themselves around her, each pulling out the metal and chitin spear-like weapons they had strapped to their backs.

Jysella tried to probe the alien minds to understand them better, and immediately regretted the decision. Though the Halcyon family trait of mind manipulation was unequalled by most normal Jedi, something in the minds of the bugs rebuffed her like never before. It was like a sledgehammer had hit her brain, as if she had just driven her fighter at several hundred kilometers a minute into a wall. She staggered backwards, clutching her head and gasping in shock. One of the bugs charged down the incline with spear spinning in its limbs. Barely managing to get her lightsaber up in time, Jysella was nevertheless knocked off balance and fell back to the ground. Her head was still spinning from her ill-fated attempt to probe the creature's head, and she couldn't manage the strength to bring her saber up to defend herself.

The bug-like creature stood over her, spear poised to strike. The other two crowded in, their bulbous eyes glinting red under the gray sky. Swallowing heavily, Jysella expected the killing blow, when her tortured mind was bombarded with a single question.

Will you Join us?

The pain of her mental barriers being shredded caused Jysella to convulse and grip at her head. She groaned in agony, her head spinning and pounding at the same time.

Suddenly, a bright green light passed over her body, and then a bright blue. Weakly tilting her head back, she realized that the bug-like

creatures no longer had any heads. She managed to twist herself around and saw the lightsabers fly back to their points of origin. The green flew into the outstretched hands of Corellia's Falleen Jedi Knight, while the blue flew into the hand of her Selonian Apprentice.
"Shrona, see to her," the voice of Natua Wan called out, seemingly from very far away. "I'll secure the area."
The polecat face of Natua's apprentice appeared in Jysella's line of sight.
"Don't worry, Jedi Knight Horn, I'll make things better," Shrona said earnestly. Her black eyes shone with innocence as she placed her small paws on either side of Jysella's head and began to concentrate.
"You have a lightsaber?" Jysella managed, feeling the pain recede.
Shrona's head bobbed in affirmative. "My master helped me make it on the trip to Terephon. She said I'd need it if I went outside. I'm not old enough to have it all the time though so I give it back to her when I don't need it."
Jysella smiled faintly, typical of Natua to find some way to go around the unspoken rule that apprentices under twelve years of age couldn't have a lightsaber. "Blue huh?"
"Sky-blue's my favorite color," Shrona replied. She let her hands fall away. "There, all better?"
Jysella experimentally rose to her feet and carefully looked left, and then right, testing the range of motion of her head. After a feeling no pain or even a residual headache, she smiled. "Yeah, good job."
"Master Wan is teaching me a lot. She's very smart," Shrona said modestly.
"When did the two of you get in?"
"We just arrived with the home fleets of Gheer and Thane," Natua answered. Shrona skipped her way over to her master's side, and then walked back to Jysella while holding on to one of Natua's hands. "We sensed the disturbance in the Force and ordered our dropship to lower its ramp as it flew over the area. We arrived just in time it seems."
The three Jedi glanced apprehensively at the decapitated bugs.
"What do you think they are?" Jysella lightly poked her toe at the carapace of one.
"Giant bugs," Natua deadpanned.
"My people eat bugs," Shrona supplied. "But these don't look too tasty."
"We'll drag one back to the Galney estate," Jysella glared at the new complication. "There was something off about these bugs."
"There's probably more of them," Shrona spoke up, earning curious stares from the older two. "I mean, all the bugs we eat and raise live in

colonies, with queens and guardians, and everything. If these are just soldier bugs, they have to be soldiering from somewhere."
Natua and Jysella exchanged dark glances.
"Maybe this is the third faction we were looking for," Natua said in as even a voice as possible.
"A giant race of space bugs is trying to get Corellia and Hapes to war with each other?" Jysella raised an eyebrow.
"In some parts of this galaxy, just the fact that there are a giant group of space bugs capable of space-flight would be impossible enough," Natua pointed out.
Jysella nodded. "True enough. Let's drag two of these things back to the estate. Hopefully we can learn more there."
(-(-(II)-)-)
It turns out that she had traveled further away from the estate than she had originally thought. She had left shortly after midday, but was now returning with Natua, Shrona, and two insectoid corpses shortly before dinner. Slogging through a marshy bog with the remains of two giant bugs was not her idea of fun, and she felt as if she should have been given some type of warning before hand; something along the lines of 'danger, being a Jedi means dragging human-sized ugly bug carcasses through a swamp.' And of course, despite being Jedi, neither she or Natua or Shrona were able to accomplish such a task without getting their clothes covered in muck.
They were quite the sight, dragging the bodies through the immaculate and dust-free entryway of the estate, disheveled and smelling of the swamp gases they had been inundated with for the past few hours. It was probably why those dining in the main hall had to come and investigate the source of the not-so-pleasant odor now wafting through the estate.
"Hi big brother," Jysella blew a stray strand of mud-caked hair out of her face. Valin could only blink in bemusement. "Look, I brought back dinner."
Eyes darted to the muck-covered bug corpses, and more than one nobleperson who had come to investigate immediately hurried away to regurgitate what little of the dinner they had eaten. Even the Corellian officers who had been eating with them looked slightly ill.
"Sella," Valin said slowly, eyebrows raised in a way that made him very closely resemble their father.
"There were three of these things, tried to kill me, Natua and Shrona got to them first," Jysella gestured with a tired shrug. At the moment, she wanted nothing more than to take a hot shower and enjoy the

silken sheets and luxuries of her guest room. "They were really weird in the Force, might be behind all the trouble."
"Okay," Valin nodded slowly. He knelt by one of the bodies. "But what are they?"
There was a terrified cry, and the Jedi and nobles all whirled around to see a distraught Entora Zar staring at the track of dirt and grime on the rug-covered wood floor.
"Crazy Jedi! You are fortunate the Ducha is not here! Oh, the mess!" Entora snapped her fingers at several of the wait-staff. "Quick, clean this up before the Ducha returns! Jedi, I hope you have a good reason for bringing your trophies inside the house like this! House Galney has the finest taxidermists in Hapes and would have prepared your kills for you!"
"Do you know when the Ducha will return?" Valin ignored the hysterics.
"She's meeting with several other members of the Heritage Council," Entora shook her head. "I was told only that I should see to it that you Jedi and the esteemed Corellians are as comfortable as possible here."
"Do they not need our help in planning any future attacks?" Natua asked neutrally.
"I do not think they are planning, Jedi," Entora said. "The Ducha is known for socializing with her peers and has taken great pride in the fact that it is now her ancestral home that shelters the Jedi instead of AlGray's."
"Competition among allies, huh," Valin noted. "Short of flying back up to her ship, is there any way we can contact her? These…bodies… might be part of a greater scheme and we have to warn the Heritage Council before tomorrow's celebrations on Hapes."
Entora shook her head once. "She left clear orders that she was not to be interrupted save for the most dire of reasons."
"And we can't contact the Jedi Praxeum on Corellia because the Transitory Mists prevent outgoing hypercomms," Valin summed up, taking charge. "Entora, have you seen these creatures before?"
"No, never," Entora said, after taking a second look at the corpses. "This is my first time. If one of the other Houses thought they'd have fun by bringing their own hunting beasts to this planet, there's going to be hell to pay."
Valin rubbed at his face. "Okay, then. Does this estate come equipped with an updated galactic codex?"
"Of course," Entora sounded insulted. "We are not the backwater barbarians some of your media might make us out to be. The moment we realized the outsiders would not leave us alone, the Ducha sought

to gain an understanding of the rest of the galaxy. The codeci can be found in the *Villa Solis* library."
"Does the *Villa Solis* also have a lab?" Valin continued
"Well…yes. Some of the Ducha's ancestors dabbled in science and the study of this world. Might I enquire what you plan to do?"
"Since we can't contact the outside world and the Jedi Masters to help us figure out what these creatures are, we'll have to do a little investigating ourselves. If you have a codex and a lab, that should make our job a whole lot easier. We can also use the resources of the Corellian ships in orbit if we have to."
"Oh," Entora was nonplussed. "Then by all means, do your Jedi business. Myself and the staff of the *Villa Solis* will be on hand if you need anything."
"Then can you please tell Ducha Galney and Ducha AlGray, if possible, to delay tomorrow's attacks. There might be more to this than we've realized."
"I will try, but I do not think they will appreciate being dictated to. Is there anything else?"
"Yes, which way to the lab?"
"In the basement. The library is on the upper level by the solarium."
"Thank you for your assistance," Natua inclined her head. "We will inform the Ducha that you have been most helpful. Come, my apprentice, let us bring these bodies to the basement."
Shrona nodded, and began pushing one of the insect corpses, while Natua dragged the second one behind her. Entora and the rest of the staff busied themselves with the trail of grime left behind, and Valin and Jysella stepped off to the side and into an unoccupied room.
"Sella," Valin folded his arms in front of his chest patiently.
"Don't give me that, Val, you're not dad," Jysella muttered.
Rather than lecture, as Jysella had expected, he simply asked. "Are you okay?"
Jysella started to nod, then shrugged, then shook her head.
"I felt something off in the Force, felt you in pain, but then by the time I stepped outside this building, everything was normal again."
"There was something really strange with those bugs, Val. Through the Force. It was like…I don't know. It was as if someone was searching me, trying to find something in common to hook me."
"Hook you?"
"Yeah, like I said, strange." Jysella exhaled tiredly. "And when I tried to probe *their* minds, I must have opened my own brain to that connection it was looking for. It was as if millions of minds suddenly

hammered their way into my head. If Natua and Shrona hadn't arrived then, I don't know what would have happened."
Valin's face was tight and he nodded stiffly. "It's a good thing they did then. I highly doubt that these creatures are here by coincidence. The sooner we get to the bottom of this, the better."
(-(-(III)-)-)
As if her stay in the Consortium couldn't get any worse.
Jysella woke early in the morning, the-sun-hasn't-even-risen early, to the feeling of intense danger pulsating in the Force. A quick check of the other Force sensitives revealed that they too had awoken. A faint whistling noise sounded from outside her room, and a split second later the bay windows erupted in a storm of fire and shrapnel.
Jysella rolled off to the other side of her bed as flaming debris rocketed by her. The explosion was echoed in other parts of the estate, letting her know that the blast wasn't an accident of any sort; the *Villa Solis* was under attack.
She managed to snag her utility belt and her lightsaber, but her outer Jedi robes and most her wardrobe had disappeared in the flaming wreck. A nightgown wasn't necessarily the best battle outfit, but it wasn't as if she had a choice.
Another whistling sound.
Jysella flattened herself to the ground and a ball of flame ripped through the burning hole, leaving a trail of liquid fire in its wake. It plowed into the doorway, blowing a hole into the adjacent hallway with a deafening blast. Hazarding a glance out of where the window had once been, Jysella felt her mouth grow dry. What looked like dozens of flaming meteoric projectiles were flying out from the swamp and towards the building. And an estate made of stone and wood wasn't really any different than a tiny cabin made of stone and wood, it just took longer to burn down.
"Oh, sithspit." Jysella scrambled to her feet.
The dozen of projectiles landed almost simultaneously, rocking the building to its very foundation and sending Jysella flying out into the hallway and bouncing painfully off an unforgiving wall.
"Jysella!" Natua's voice called out above the crackling flames that had practically consumed the passageway and surrounding rooms.
Through the smoke, Jysella could see Natua, and small Shrona tucked against her chest with a protective arm wrapped around her. "Did you ask for the wakeup call?" Jysella yelled back.
"I'm lodging a complaint with Entora, they're two hours early," Natua called back. Another explosion and one of the ceiling beams collapsed.

Jysella's Force-sensitive hearing could make out the panicked cries of the Corellian officers and the Hapan nobles who had been sleeping over. She sought out her brother and sensed he was doing his best to keep Corellian Admiral Karathas and her contingent of officers alive. Hurrying through the flames to Natua's side, Jysella hissed. "Something tells me the rest of the bug colony didn't appreciate us killing their friends."
"Either that or this is a standard Hapan custom," Natua replied back, her voice tense as she used her abilities to keep Shrona from any harm. "You know, wake up by attempted assassination."
The fires continued to roar all around them, crackling and popping and causing extreme levels of mayhem and damage. Another explosion, and the floor they were standing on began to creak ominously. Jysella met Natua's eyes with an almost annoyed sense of dread.
And then the floor gave out.
Ash, embers, and all manner of debris fell down after the three Jedi, overwhelming the floor immediately beneath them and causing it to collapse as well. Fortunately, Jysella, Natua, and Shrona had only been on the fourth floor of an eight-floor estate. Unfortunately, they just happened to fall through the remaining three levels to the ground floor.
"Ow," Jysella groaned. Never one for the more physical side of the Force, she wasn't quite able to shelter herself through the painful descent. Cuts, newly forming bruises, and some burns now covered her arms, legs, and face.
"Shrona!" Natua called out, urgency in her voice betraying just how much emotion the Falleen was holding back.
"I'm all right, master," the Selonian, still tucked protectively against her master's chest, replied in a small voice, nuzzling her protector reassuringly.
Natua released a breath and nodded. From Natua's own cut and battered state, Jysella could tell that her Falleen friend had used every ounce of focus she had to shield her nine-year old apprentice. "Good, stay that way."
"Are you three okay?" Valin's voice cut through the daze Jysella was feeling.
Jysella immediately whirled around to see her big brother and some of the Corellians taking cover in the decimated den just a few meters from where she, Natua, and Shrona had fallen. "Been worse. What's going on?"
"No idea," Valin shrugged.

"And comms are down so we can't contact the fleet," a soot-covered Admiral Karathas replied, a cut on her forehead staining her gray hair red.
"At least whoever it is stopped firing their artillery," a surviving Hapan noble spoke up. The group blinked, realizing that the noble was telling the truth.
"Not good," Jysella and Valin said in unison.
"What do you mean not good?" The noble protested. "You want us to get pounded and burned to ash!"
"No," Valin barely took a moment to glance at the man. "It means that they're now sending ground forces in to finish the job."
"From the scale of the artillery bombardment, our attackers no doubt have troops to spare," Natua added. "As we have no soldiers to speak of, we are at a slight disadvantage."
"I'd hate to see what a major disadvantage is," Jysella muttered under her breath.
"Look!" One of the Corellian soldiers called out, gesturing towards a blown-out window. "Something's coming!"
The combination of surviving Hapans, Corellians, and Jedi surged to the window. Under the dim glow of the Transitory Mists, they could see a sheer mass of bodies scamper out from the surrounding moorlands. The shadowy mass seemed to stretch from one end of the marshlands to the other in a terrifying show of force.
"Well that's not good," Valin said grimly. "What do we have for weapons?"
The group looked at one and other.
"Seven blaster pistols, two hunting rifles, and your lightsabers it seems," Admiral Karathas said after a quick inventory.
"Save your blaster packs then," Valin said quickly. "Natua, Jysella, and I will try to trim their numbers before they get here. Hopefully someone on one of those Hapan ships is paying attention to what's happening down here and gets here before we're overwhelmed."
"Master!" Shrona called out anxiously.
Natua unclipped Shrona's saber and handed it to her apprentice. "You have the important job of protecting these people, Jedi Apprentice Ruluwoor. You are a Jedi, you will stand your ground and keep any harm from coming to them."
Swallowing, the Selonian girl nodded and took her lightsaber. "Good luck, master."
"Just checking, Valin," Jysella whispered as they stepped through the shattered window and out onto the grounds in front of the Galney estate. "Do we have any sort of plan?"

"Tiu's heading here with some help," Valin said with a cool calmness that Jysella envied. Tiu Zax was his teenage Omwati apprentice who had remained with the fleet to keep them apprised of any unexpected changes in orbit. Being Omwati also meant that she was a skilled tactician and was better suited coordinating fleet movements in any case. "We'll have to buy some time though. From what I could sense, Ducha Galney had our forces on a training exercise with fleet elements from the loyalist faction."
"Great," Jysella groaned. "How long?"
"Don't think about it that way, Sella," Valin drawled, activating his lightsaber. The scar across his nose gleamed in the green light. "Think about it as a morning workout."
Jysella rolled her eyes and activated her own sulfuric-shaded blade, the yellow piercing the predawn air. "Val, your sense of humor's as bad as dad's. Stop."
Natua stepped up on Valin's opposite side, a lightsaber blade of shimmering gold that shone almost white at the center.
"Using Ganner's lightsaber?" Jysella commented, seeing where Natua's blade was still strapped to the woman's hip.
"Impossible odds, people to protect, stupid act of heroics, I figured the situation called for it," Natua answered monotonously. "But I have no intention of dying today."
"Well, neither do we," Valin voiced. He narrowed his eyes as the mass of creatures began to grow closer and closer. In the dim glow of the Transitory Mists, only their shadowy outlines could be seen, but they were definitely insect in nature.
And as the insects grew closer, both Valin and Natua stiffened.
"Hey Sella," Valin said, his jaw clenched. "You know that Force-probing thing you mentioned. It's trying to get in my head too."
"And my own," Natua added.
Jysella could feel the probe as well, but also a bleed over of emotion from the approaching mass of bugs. The directive to destroy, to eliminate all traces, all witnesses. The single compulsion spread across the thousands of bug-minds heading their way. Remembering what happened last time, Jysella shut the sensations out and concentrated solely on herself and her surroundings.
She took several deep breaths, holding up her saber in front of her and then brought it up and above her head. She glanced at her brother and Natua, and both seemed to have likewise blocked out the probing Force presence.
Valin took up a wide, Yuuzhan Vong-inspired combat stance, sharp intelligent eyes taking in the approaching horde with an analytical

glint. His arm continued undulate, like a serpent poised to strike, very reminiscent of an amphistaff; another reminder of his past. He tilted his head back slightly at the approaching horde, a universal sign for 'bring it on'.
In contrast, Natua simply drew her lightsaber across the dirt in front of her, her eyes closed in silent communion with the Force. When her eyes opened, they blazed with the emotion the Falleen would never show; glimmering as she held her lightsaber up in front of her. With an almost regal motion, she stepped over the line and stared down the approaching hoard unflinchingly. The message was clear in the determination in her face, *none shall pass.*
The trio formed a loose battle-meld, and Jysella allowed a deadly smile to appear. "Let's dance."
The bipedal bugs then crashed upon the three Jedi. Illuminated by the glowing green and yellow blades, the mass of insects split into three constant streams to meet the trio of Jedi with unrelenting force.
Valin met their charge with one of his own, his blade aggressively ripping through the first line of attackers before they even readied their weapons. He was a whirl of motion, his green blade lengthening and shortening with skilled precision as Valin altered the size of his blade to match his movements. The carapace-like spears wielded by the bugs were evidently lightsaber resistant, but not lightsaber-proof. The staffs were able to take several blows in the same region before the atom-length edges of the lightsaber cleaved through them. But this proved no challenge for the older of the two Horns. He used his offensive-based style to simply overwhelm the tide of insects that swarmed him, wading upstream into their masses, bringing the fight to them.
Natua, in the meantime, was systematically demolishing any bug that tried to go around her. Not limited to just her lightsaber abilities, Natua sent bug after bug flying backwards with liberal use of waves of Force energy, and then cleaved apart any insect that tried to fill in the vacuum. The golden blade continued to flash as it sliced cleanly through limbs, abdomens, and anything else that it made contact with. The Falleen unleashed her unique brand of devastation against the mindless masses that charged her. And not a single bug managed to get past her position in the interim.
Jysella was not about to be ignored either. The younger Horn danced gracefully between spear-thrusts and enraged bugs, her saber delivering pinpoint stabs and deadly sweeps without a single movement wasted. The bugs surrounded her, but she bent herself backwards when the insects thrust their spears out. With the help of a

slight illusion to make her appear further away than she actually was, the spears were thrust forward with greater force than needed and impaled the insect on the opposite side. She then spun her body around, slicing the bugs in two.
The fighting continued on. A wall of bodies forming in front of Natua. A small crater-like pit made of bodies surrounding Jysella. And before Valin was a field of broken insect bodies. But they were only three Jedi, and the enemy seemed innumerous.
Natua was first to receive a serious wound, a spear bypassing her saber—it had been locked up by two other spears—and piercing the Falleen Jedi in her stomach. She staggered backwards, back over the line and fell to one knee, gasping for air.
Jysella was next, her rhythm predicted by one of the insects. One moment she was twisting away from a series of attacks, and the next, the pole-portion of the spear slammed into the side of her head, sending her sprawling. She tried to get back up, but let out a scream of pain and fell back down when another spear blade pierced the arm she had been using to support herself.
Valin, distracted by his sister's plight, was impaled by two spears hurled from a distance with wicked accuracy. One spear sliced through one of his legs, pinning him in place, while the other lanced through the opposite-side shoulder.
The swarm halted where they were. The sky was considerably lighter than when the fighting had started, and the ground definitely filled with more corpses. Yet, it appeared as if the Jedi had reached their limits. Bleeding and out of breath, they were all calling on the Force to sustain themselves, their bodies protesting any further movement.
"Just in time," Valin breathed, his eyes closed.
Before the insects could deliver a final blow, a squadron of gunships suddenly raced down from high orbit; their laser turrets laying a blanket of red energy across the moorland. The thousands of bugs immediately began scurrying for cover as they were decimated by the hundreds. The hatch of one of the gunships opened up, and a single figure dropped down from the sky, her dark blue lightsaber igniting and catching the first rays of sunlight.
"Great timing, Zax," Valin managed.
"Thanks for holding out so long, Master," the blue-skinned Omwati teen chirped. She regarded Valin's predicament with a curious tilt of her head. "That looks kind of painful."
"It kind of is," Valin remarked.
Tiu Zax sliced away the tips of the spears and then eased the shafts out of her master. With speed that was accented by her slender hands,

she quickly applied bacta patches to the wounds to stem the bleeding.
"Master, what did I tell you about facing a giant mob of creatures wanting to kill you?"
"I know, I know," Valin grimaced. "I may be Corellian, but odds can still kill me."
"Wait, she's had to lecture you before?" Jysella asked, catching the bandage tossed to her and applying it to her arm.
Tiu glared at Valin from where she was tending to Natua. "My Master, in his infinite wisdom, decided that taking on an army of pirates by himself was something a good Corellian Jedi should do. It's a good thing he's told me to do as he says and not as he does."
"In my defense, they were the ones who kidnapped me and tried to hold me hostage without taking away my lightsaber," Valin said. "How was I to know that they had just raided a CorSec armory and had all those rotary cannons?"
Jysella smiled faintly. There was a nine-year age difference between the fourteen year old Tiu and her big brother, but Valin had had Tiu as his apprentice for the past four years. More accurately, Tiu had chosen Valin to be her master after he had discovered her in a refugee camp and recognized her Force potential. Though he had only been nineteen at the time, Tiu would have no one else teach her. In a way, she was the perfect match for the analytical and tactical mind of Valin's. Omwati were naturally intellectual and enjoyed solving puzzles with great quantities of data.
Tiu held a hand up to her earpiece. "Master, the gunships are reporting that the bugs are fleeing deeper into the swamp, do you want them to pursue?"
"No," Valin breathed, lying on the dirt. "We don't know what else those bugs have."
"Roger. Lyton Leader, take up holding positions around the *Villa Solis*. Have any medical supplies transferred immediately to the surface," Tiu ordered, seemingly not affected by the fact that her hands and clothes were covered in the blood of both Natua and Valin. As the sun rose above the horizon, the downy-white feathers on her head fluttered in a light breeze. "Lyton Eleven, send the recording of the fight back to the *Halcyon*, and then tell the captain to send it via courier back to the Jedi Praxeum. The masters will no doubt want to learn what has transpired."
In the meantime, the surviving Hapans and Corellians emerged from what was left of the *Villa Solis.* From the light of the morning sun, barely anything was left of the once magnificent structure but charcoaled timber and its scorched, rocky foundation.

"In light of recent events, I think we need to re-evaluate Corellia's participation in this civil war," Valin looked to Admiral Karathas.
"Indeed," the gray-haired admiral said tersely. "There is evidently more at play than we suspected."
"The attempted assassination on the Queen Mother took place a few hours ago," Tiu reported. "If the information we're receiving is to be believed. The entire attacking force was destroyed, but they nearly wiped out the entire Royal Guard in the process."
"What? How?" Jysella's eyes grew round.
Tiu looked apprehensive. "Reports are saying that Jedi Knight Zekk and someone named Alema Rar participated in the fight and managed to escape. It sounds like Zekk was in charge of a battle meld, and Alema spearheaded an attack on the thickest parts of the Royal Guard. It is just a rumor, but the Queen Mother herself is said to have been badly wounded in the attack."
"What? Zekk? No way," Valin and the others were rooted to their spots at the news. "He's supposed to be the godfather to Tenel Ka's daughter. Why would he even be helping the Heritage Council?"
Tiu shrugged helplessly. "I know, Master. It doesn't make sense, but that's what the reports say. The Heritage Council is rallying their navy as quick as they can to strike before the Queen Mother fully recovers."
"If the Royal Guard is as decimated as you say, even a regular force of marines would be able to invade the palace," Natua commented, her body prone to her distraught Selonian apprentice. Shrona had both her hands over Natua's stomach and was using the Force to encourage the bacta to work more efficiently.
"We definitely need to get back to the fleet then," Valin said, leaning on his apprentice as he stood. "There are far too many questions that need to be answered, and we should start with the Heritage Council. I highly doubt such a large insect force could come to this planet without anyone knowing about it, let alone the ruler of this planet."
"And if this planet's been compromised, others might have been as well," Tiu added, following his train of thought. "Which of course, complicates things further."
"Great," Jysella grumbled. "Even when helping out in simple civil war, things can't stay uncomplicated."
"We're Jedi," Natua breathed, a team of medics helped her onto a stretcher. "If we wanted uncomplicated, we'd be politicians."
"Oh, that reminds me," Tiu said. "Master Hamner and Admiral Niathal are running for Chief of State of the Galactic Alliance. Ambassador Leia Solo is running in opposition. I have no idea how that came about though, but it was announced over the HoloNet yesterday evening."

As one, Natua, Jysella, and Valin looked to each other with wan grins.
"The answer to that, my apprentice," Valin began. "Is that…"
"It's complicated," Natua and Jysella finished in unison.
Tiu nodded her head sagely. "I thought as much."
"Leave it to the Solos to turn even politics more complicated than they have to be." Jysella laughed darkly. "Let's finish up our little corner of the galaxy first, before we come up for air. If this corner of the galaxy is so convoluted, I'd hate to see what the rest of the galaxy is devolving into."
(-(-(IV)-)-)
"*I am sorry, but the Ducha does not wished to be disturbed at this moment,"* the familiar misshapen face of Entora Zar filled the holoscreen as the woman shook her head. *"She extends her condolences and regrets any distress the attack on her ancestral home may have caused."*
"And how exactly did you end up on her flagship?" Jysella, the least injured of the three Jedi, glowered.
"When you told me to report the findings of those creatures, my lady bid me to give the report personally. As the hour was late when I finished, I stayed aboard. I did not learn of the attack until waking."
"Listen, Entora," Jysella said through gritted teeth. "My brother was badly hurt, as was one of my closest friends. Corellia lost three officers in that attack and we are contemplating pulling out if we do not get any answers."
"I will relay the message as soon as I am able," Entora bowed her head and ended the communications.
Unable to help herself, Jysella emitted some particularly vile Corellian curses and pounded the console before her. Among her many worries was Alema. Just what had that Twi'lek gotten herself into? Maybe her brother was right about her too.
The intercom chimed. "*Jedi Knight Horn. We've cleared the thicket of Transitory Mists. Communications with the rest of the galaxy is now possible."*
Jysella quickly returned her attention to the hypercomm unit before her. "Establish communications hook up to the Corellian Praxeum. Urgent priority."
"Establishing."
Seconds later, the holographic form of her father and mother appeared over her desk. "Dad. Mommy? Hi!"
"Jysella," Mirax greeted gently. *"Your father and I just received the courier report. You and your brother have been busy, haven't you?"*

"That's an understatement. Did the Prime Minister have any reaction to the news?"
Corran pressed his lips together. *"Yes. Unfortunately, she says that unless the Heritage Council no longer wants us there, Corellia will not break its word of aid once it is given. I took my concerns to Intelligence Director Lemora, and Gavelle is sending a team of her agents to help you out. Technically they'll be tasked to Admiral Karathas, but I get the sense that the Admiral doesn't wish to be involved in this war any more than you do."*
"And the tissue samples?"
"That's another strange thing. They came back as positive for Killik tissue."
"Killik?" Jysella said, her forehead scrunching in confusion.
"I'm not surprised you're not familiar with them. They're a race of insects that supposedly moved on from this galaxy several millennia ago. Their primary stronghold on Alderaan had been empty for thousands of years when the Death Star destroyed the planet. We're just lucky that part of the Alderaanian Diaspora managed to update the Corellian archives with their own data in an effort to preserve Alderaanian history."
"So…what are Killiks doing in the Consortium?"
"I don't have any more information than you do," Corran shook his head worriedly. *"They're definitely not native to the sector. I'm having the apprentices at the academy go over all the information we have about the Killiks to look for some answers. But, like I said, they haven't been seen for millennia, not much is known about them."*
"How about any records of them being Force-sensitive?"
"There are none, but it's not too far-fetched. They're a hive-mind, so if one is Force-sensitive, it is more than likely the others will share some form of sensitivity as well. You've encountered Force-sensitive Killiks?"
"Not really. More like the Force was flowing through them and someone else was using that to command the Killiks."
"*There are stories about something called a 'Joiner.' People from other species being absorbed into a Killik nest by means of gradual alternations to their brains,"* Mirax read off a datapad.
"*From the sounds of it, if a Jedi or someone Force sensitive was absorbed by the Killiks nests, they'd be able to use the Killiks as an amplifier of sorts,"* Corran nodded. *"The Joiner's goals become every bit the goals of the Killik nest. But the nest's own needs and well-being will always come first."*
"Great," Jysella rubbed her face. "So what Val, Natua, and I have to do now is find the lone Force-sensitive Joiner on Terephon."

"*Not necessarily.*" Corran shook his head. *"If what we're saying is true, and that a Force user has been absorbed by the Killik nest in the Hapan Cluster, then the Force user will have an untold level of ability and range. The individual could just as well be on Hapes or Relephon, or in any of the systems in the area."*
"Well, we can't track him or her through the Force," Jysella said with frustration. "I tried probing one of those bugs and nearly got my brain splattered in the inside of my skull."
"*Sella,*" Mirax's eyes widened.
"I'm fine now, mom," Jysella said quickly. "But using the Force against these things won't be easy. I could create brief illusions that fooled them, but that was me manipulating the air around me. We can't..."
"*Jysella?*"
"Sorry, I just thought of something," Jysella said slowly. "There were reports that Alema and Zekk participated in the attack on the Queen Mother's palace a few hours ago. Alema, I might have expected that, but Zekk, no way. He's supposed to be the godfather to Allana and he'd never go against the Queen Mother unless something drastic happened to his thought processes. If these Killiks are capable of brainwashing their Joiners...or if the needs of whatever nest he's been Joined to overwrote his own desires..."
"*That would certainly explain it,*" Corran concurred.
"*That still leaves one other unknown, though,*" Mirax spoke up.
"*There's at least one other Force sensitive Joined to this nest. And we're all assuming that there's only one nest in play. If one group of Killiks managed to reappear after several millennia in hiding, who's to say that others haven't?*"
"Thanks for that cheerful thought, mom," Jysella groaned. "Okay. We'll start doing sweeps for insane Force-sensitive people connected to hives of giant bugs. There can't be that many of them out there. When the intel team gets here, we'll use them to keep tabs on the Heritage Council. If Terephon has Killiks, they might have gotten to Ducha Galney. And if Terephon has Killiks, other planets might have them too."
"*The only thing that doesn't really make sense is the fact that the Killiks are in the Hapan sector in the first place,*" Corran said grimly. *"Records show that they're pacifistic, concerned more about growing their colonies outwards than the politics of other cultures. We may just be scratching the surface with this, so be careful, Sella."*
"I will," Jysella reassured. "At least now I know what we're up against out here. *Halcyon* out."
(-(-(V)-)-)

The first step of the in-development plan was to re-secure Terephon and hunt down where the Killiks had come from. Jysella hypothesized that her walk had probably taken her close to a hive entrance and that those she had met had been sentries. Otherwise, the Killiks wouldn't have had any reason to show themselves.
Valin agreed. "The attack the other night, morning, whatever, was probably an attempt at eliminating any witnesses. If the Killiks are trying to act covertly, a swarm of several thousand and an artillery barrage isn't all that covert."
"We'll start there, then," Jysella stated. "Even if the Force sensitive individual isn't on this planet, we can at least clear it of any further Killik presence and hope we find more answers at the same time."
"The Corellian fleet will maintain a holding pattern over Terephon," Admiral Karathas said. "If an orbital strike is needed, our guns will be ready."
"Will the Ducha appreciate having her homeworld fired on by the Corellians?" Tiu Zax questioned.
"She will not have a choice," Admiral Karathas countered. "We were attacked on her homeworld by creatures supposedly last seen millennia ago. Creatures capable of controlling minds and using your Force. She won't risk war with the Corellians, not when their own intentions were declared by the attack on the royal palace."
"Then again, if we're the aggressors, we could end up uniting all of Hapes against us," Valin said.
"The alternative would be to let the bugs eventually take over all of Hapes," Jysella countered. "If Corellia just pulled out now, the civil war would still occur, only with more deaths. And then, if the Heritage Council really does have an army of thousands of bugs spread throughout the sector, Tenel Ka won't last long. Worse, they could get to her and make her a Joiner. If their abilities are Force-related, they could then use her bond with the other Jedi, and so on. But we can't switch sides and support the Queen Mother because someone needs to keep track of what the Heritage Council is doing."
"So what happens if the Heritage Council fleets decide to make their move against the forces of the Queen Mother in the meantime? Do the Corellians assist them?" Valin looked to the fleet admiral.
"We'll perform a rear-guard holding action," Admiral Karathas said. "Though it is clear that this matter has become increasingly convoluted, Corellia will not run from this problem. Nor, however, will we exacerbate it."
"Worse comes to worse, you'll have to fire on the Heritage Council vessels," Natua commented from her hover stretcher.

"Natua?" Questioning eyes darted to the Falleen.
"I think we are all in agreement when it comes to preventing the Killiks from taking over the Consortium via their proxy, the Heritage Council," Natua said evenly. "At the moment, if the Council fleets attack, with Corellian support, Tenel Ka will be dethroned, the Killiks will prevail."
"I understand what you're saying. But if we fire on the loyalists, we'd be killing hundreds of thousands of Hapans, most of whom were just following orders and the lead of their heads of houses," Jysella protested. "Why not simply return to Corellia?"
"The Killiks would win in any case," Natua answered. "Think of it this way. We leave, the Heritage Council and royalists still engage in a bloody civil war. Both sides spent, how will they stop the armies of bugs like the ones we saw on Terephon? The Killiks had to arrive on the planet somehow, so logic should dictate that the Killiks have their own ships as well."
"Corellian lives will be lost, yes," Admiral Karathas spoke up. "But I highly doubt that these Killiks will stop with the Consortium. It is better to nip this infestation in the bud than wait until it reaches the Corellian system and her allies. Who knows, when the dust settles, maybe the Queen Mother will be receptive to an alliance."
"Now that thinking is just a bit too hopeful," Valin shook his head. "We are the invading force here. Regardless of how things end up, Corellian ships have no business in Hapan territory. What we have to do is end this Killik mess as quick as we can and get as many of our people back to Corellia as soon as we can."
The second step of their plan was to make sure the Corellian Intelligence unit sent by Gavele was safely in place at the side of the Heritage Council. That would be slightly harder to do than track down a massive hive of mind-controlling insects. After all, the majority of the Heritage Council had been holed up on their flagship, the Hapan Battle Dragon *Regent's Downfall,* and getting onboard a ship sitting in the middle of a fleet of Hapan insurrectionists undetected was not exactly something one just did.
"Commander Nova Kaarz-Dance, Corellian Intelligence, Phantom squad reporting for duty." Looking to be in his early thirties or late twenties, the dark-haired officer saluted. He stood in front of his squad of eleven other individuals all dressed in clothing of Hapan naval officers. Nova's seemingly normal human features were offset by a unique band of diamond markings on either side of his neck, and a smaller quartet of diamond markings in the center of his forehead. His eyes were also strikingly orange, inhumanly so, making his mixed-race lineage evident.

"At ease," Admiral Karathas said firmly. "Do you have your orders?"
"Yes, ma'am. To observe the Heritage Council and inform you if we believe they have been compromised in any way."
"Will you need our assistance in getting aboard their ship?"
"No ma'am," Nova shook his head. "Operative Antilles here is the best damned slicer on Corellia. She'll be able to get us in without too much trouble."
"Antilles?" Karathas' eyebrows rose. Both Valin and Jysella glanced down the line of intelligence operatives in surprise.
A svelte teenage woman, long hair dyed Hapan red, stepped forward, hands clasped behind her. "Yes, ma'am. Operative Myri Antilles, CorIntel."
"You are confident in your abilities?"
"Nothing is certain, ma'am," Myri replied. "But I have a strong chance of succeeding."
"The operative graduated a year ahead and a top of her class," Nova said. "She hasn't let us down yet."
"If you're certain then," Admiral Karathas replied. "It is highly unlikely we'll be able to retrieve you if things go wrong."
"That's expected ma'am."
"Don't take any unnecessary risks," Valin said, joining the briefing.
"We've read the briefing about the Killiks," Nova acknowledged. "None of us has any desire to be a bug-hugger any time soon."
"Bug-hugger?" Valin raised an eyebrow.
"Sorry, Jedi, sir. Just something one of my squad made up on the way over."
Knowing the Corellian penchant for colorful language, Valin smiled faintly. "See that you don't become bug-huggers then. Good luck."
"Sir," Nova and his squadron snapped to attention once more, saluting crisply, before filing out of the briefing room.
The third step to the ever evolving plan involved a bit of selfishness on Jysella's part. She wanted to return to the Relephon system to try and find Alema. Naturally, her sentiments once again rubbed her brother the wrong way, but Jysella was determined to get some answers.
"Look, Val. We don't need five Force-sensitives sweeping a single system for an army of bugs. If there are other bugs in Relephon corrupting AlGray, then we should know."
"Don't give me that, Sella. You want to go there for Alema."
"And is that wrong? She's my friend! She wouldn't suddenly participate in an attack on Hapes unless something's happened."
"And if she's a Joiner, she's no longer the Alema you know. You read the reports; most Joiners never regain their sanity, even if separated

from their Killik nest. If you find her, chances are she'll be insane and you'll have to kill her. You're too emotionally involved in this."
"Of course I'm emotionally involved you stunted gundark! But I won't abandon my friends, and I certainly won't kill them."
"Sella…"
"What? Do you want to go in my place?" Jysella hissed back. "I'm sure you'll love the chance to rid the galaxy of a fallen Jedi."
"No," Valin said in a maddening calmness reminiscent of his father. "I want to go with you."
"You…wait…what?"
"Tiu is perfectly capable of handling the investigation, especially if Natua's staying behind."
"But…why?" Jysella looked at her big brother in complete confusion.
Valin rolled his eyes. "Really, little sister? You're asking why I want to accompany you to a planet possibly over run with thousands of mind-controlling bugs in the middle of a Hapan civil war?"
"Well, when you put it that way," Jysella said sheepishly.
"Besides," Valin shrugged, looking embarrassed. "Can you imagine what our parents would say if I let you go there by yourself?"
"Right, 'let me'," Jysella scoffed, lightly pushing the knuckles of one fist against her brother's arm. "Get packed then, Val. AlGray might be friendly for now, but chances are things will fall apart the moment we get there."
"That's one thing we can definitely agree upon."
(-(-(Chapter End)-)-)

Jacen
(-(-(I)-)-)
There were times Jacen admired his brother, times Jacen trusted his brother. He had seen Anakin do a great many things some people never would have been able to do in several lifetimes.
But Jacen was also keenly aware that Anakin was human, that he was fallible. After all, to him, Anakin wasn't some godlike figure, hero, or Jedi savant. To him, Anakin would always remain his little brother.
When Anakin made his bold prediction about Csilla and Hapes two days earlier, Jacen agreed with some of the logic, but not all of it. He immediately saw that Anakin was missing a key piece of an otherwise very complicated puzzle.
Tenel Ka.
Jacen knew his best friend and lover, and knew that the last thing Tenel Ka would do is wait around for the Corellians to attack; *wait* for allies while Corellia strengthens their positions and plots her downfall.

And that was what scared him. If Tenel Ka went on the offensive before the pieces Anakin was trying to place was ready, then the situation would rapidly tumble out of control. Once the war began, it would be too costly for the Bothans to pull out, no matter what they had done over Zonama. If the mastermind behind the war saw their carefully constructed conflict devolve, there was no telling what the 'Plan B' would unleash.
It wasn't like he could call Tenel Ka and order her to stand down. Tell her to relax, that 'he'd take care of everything.' It also was equally impossible to tell his brother about the miscalculation he had made. Anakin already had his hands full, and Jacen wasn't about to tear his brother away from Tahiri and their children with more work. Not that he didn't have his hands full trying to reform the government, but he wasn't about to burden his brother any more than he already was. Anakin may try to hide it, but Jacen could already see the strain and tension returning to his little brother's Force presence in the short time they had been together. Anakin tried to bleed off that tension before returning to his family, but if there was one thing Anakin was terrible at, it was dealing with his emotions. Jacen would know, he was hardly any better in that regard.
But there was definitely one thing Jacen was sure of, and that was that even Anakin needed help from time to time.
"You know I wouldn't ask this if I…"
His quasi-mother-in-law's image held up a hand, the glow of the holo-projection the only source of light in the room. *"Your reasoning is sound, Jacen. I for one will not allow anything to harm my daughter or granddaughter. I imagine that if your parents had a Jedi Praxeum at their disposal, they would do something similar."*
"You'll have to cut off all ties with the rest of the Order though, recall all your students who aren't in essential roles in the fleet. Say that those remaining are 'good will gestures' from Dathomir, or something to that extent. And then…"
"Jacen Solo, I am hardly a novice at the political games you seek to play," Teneniel deadpanned, proving just where her daughter's sense of humor came from.
Jacen flushed. "Sorry about that, Your Highness…Jedi Master Djo… mother-in-law…errr…just how should I address you now?"
"I would imagine my name would be a good start," Teneniel replied. *"As far as I am aware, that hasn't changed since my birth."*
Letting out small laugh, Jacen nodded. "All right, Teneniel."
"I will begin moving Dathomiri Jedi around as soon as I am able. At the moment, I can have a team led by Jedi Knight Ti to Hapes within the

next day or two. I will make the official announcement once they arrive."
"Understood, may the Force be with you."
"And you as well."
With the conversation over, Jacen made his way back to the window of his office, leaning lightly on the memorial bust that stood on a pedestal next to the window. Denon, in all its nighttime splendor shimmered back at him, with the faintest of glows on the horizon letting him know that he had once again worked through the night to move the galaxy. He rubbed at his eyes tiredly; the Force could only do so much to sustain him. Sleeping on the couch of his office once more was Seha, who had decided to stick with him for the duration of the current crisis rather than return to the temple. An equally slumbering Nelani was resting with her back to the couch and a fallen datapad by one of her hands. Both had gone all out to try and help him, and they were definitely making a small dent in his list of things to do. For some reason, some senators and politicians took to being told what to do by attractive young female Jedi much better than the 'famous' Jacen Solo. Being younger, it was also easier for Seha and Nelani to pretend as if they were being duped into a certain course of action, when in actuality they were getting the senator to go along with *their* plan. At least they were getting a crash-course in politics and how the galaxy *really* works, or tries to work in any case. Force knows that the Jedi needed more people with political experience. Too many were off meditating and solving conflicts while people like Kenth Hamner developed all the contacts and support at the real seat of power.
One of the brightest positives was that Cal Omas was fully supportive of the reform attempts and seemed determined to push them through the Senate *before* the next elections. That way the next Chief of State, Cal Omas was confident that Leia would win, would already have all the systems in place upon their assuming of Cal's office. It was as if the reform proposals from both Anakin and Jacen had breathed new life into his administration. Finally, they had someone giving them direction, a direction that they knew many could get behind.
Of course, Kenth Hamner was using his own lobbying abilities to stymie the reform proposals at every turn and introduced reforms of his own. Like it had been for the past couple of years, the senate was close to being deadlocked when it came to deciding one way or another. Not helping matters was the war between the Chiss and the Remnant, which had redirected much of the attention away from the political troubles towards the 'common enemy.'

The most ironic thing for Jacen was that here he was, trying to make the Jedi apolitical by first making the Jedi ultra-political so others could pick up the slack. Despite everything they had accomplished in the past week, there was still a Gungan's tongue-length list of things to do. Most importantly, coming up in a couple of days, was a very important vote that would signal which way the Senate was truly leaning. Two separate bills were going before the Senate. One began reforms that would reshape the government more akin to what Kenth Hamner wanted; stronger Jedi legislative powers. The other was more in line with Anakin and Jacen's plan, reducing the power of the High Council and redistributing some of that power to several senatorial committees. A two-thirds majority vote was needed, and if neither received the votes needed, another session would be held to once again hash out the finer details, before the bill went back before the Senate. The importance of this was not lost on the senators, and they were arriving on Denon from all corners of the galaxy to take part in what would truly be a historic vote.

After all his experience in war, it seemed strange to Jacen to think that the fate of the galaxy now hung not on giant fleets, armies, or epic lightsaber duels, but on whether or not people wanted to agree to a datapad full of words.

In many ways it was so much scarier. But, he didn't have a choice and could only hope that the senators did what was best for the galaxy and not for themselves.

(-(-(II)-)-)

"Yaqeel, thank you for coming," Jacen smiled at the younger Bothan Knight.

"You look like heck, Jacen," Yaqeel remarked, slipping into the chair opposite of his desk.

"That's what I told him," Nelani remarked, shooting her master a worried glance.

Yaqeel nodded empathetically. "Sorry I couldn't get here earlier, but you know how things are with Bothawui for the moment."

"That bad, huh?" Seha asked.

"They've recalled all Bothans and Bothan ships serving in the Galactic Alliance Navy. As an afterthought, they decided to recall all Bothan Jedi as well," Yaqeel's frustration bled through. "Anyone not returning would disgrace their clan and ancestors and since my clan is one of the larger ones, well…Let's just say that choosing between my clan, my family, and the Jedi wasn't exactly fun."

"The True Victory Party still leading things then," Jacen said.

"Yeah," Yaqeel exhaled. "I looked into what you wanted me to. They're using the conflict between the Hapans and Corellians as a reason to mobilize their armed forces, but I think it's just a cover. Increasing military output so soon after seceding from the Galactic Alliance might have raised eyebrows, since we all know my people's attitudes towards the Vong. But if they militarized and conduct fleet movements in the name of protecting one of the Galactic Alliance's keystones, then who can complain? If push comes to shove with the Corellians and Hapans, I think the Bothans will only give Tenel Ka a token taskforce and send the rest of their ships towards Zonama. They can say that those ships are conducting classified military maneuvers in the interest of the security of Bothawui and her allies, and since they're not part of the GA any more, they don't have to say much else."
Jacen nodded slowly, once again. "The Bothans are gambling that the galaxy will be too paralyzed by the Corellian-Hapan and Ascendancy-Remnant conflicts that the senate won't be able to act."
"That makes sense, master," Nelani spoke up. "I've even heard rumors that the Bakurans are thinking of invoking their secession clause in their treaty with the GA if things get any worse. They don't want to be dragged down by the rest of the galaxy when everything's just sunshine and rainbows for them."
"It's anyone's guess if the Galactic Alliance will still be in existence when the vote on the reforms takes place," Jacen breathed, shaking his head wearily. "Thanks Yaqeel. Probably shouldn't keep you here much longer. Don't want the True Victory technocrats to think you're a spy or something."
Yaqeel nodded darkly. "They would do that. Did you know that Yantahar and I had to refuse the Bothan Council's demand that we start a Bothan Jedi Academy? We should have just done what Kolir did and not return at all, save us the headache."
"But what of her clan?" Seha asked worriedly. "You said anyone who doesn't return disgraces their clan."
"Her clan is the Alya," Yaqeel said with a sigh. "One of the few clans with bucket loads of power, influence, and prestige. No one's going to call them out if she doesn't return, and she knows it; even sent the Council a nice holo-message telling them that her loyalties were to the Jedi."
"Bet the Council loved that," Nelani chirped.
"Sure," Yaqeel chuckled ruefully. "They just enjoy us young Jedi rebelling against their well-ordered plans. When Yantahar and I refused to go along with them, they had the two of us in solitary confinement for a week. We were told to reflect on what it meant to be a Bothan

and on where our loyalties were supposed to lie. Probably didn't help when Yantahar called the council a bunch of backstabbing old people who wouldn't know a Jedi if one came up and waved a hand in front of their face."
Jacen and Nelani chuckled at that. "Yeah, probably not."
"I know the Horns were just trying to help Corellian and the Core-ward Force-sensitives, but they've really made other developed governments envious of the Corellian Praxeum. Especially since the Corellian Jedi made a mess during the Tion Civil War.
"So, to sum it up," Seha spoke up, her feet curled up beneath her on the couch. "The Bothans are still going crazy about their war of annihilation. Are using the Hapans to mask their fleet maneuvers, and are more than likely going to attack Zonama Sekot the moment Corellia launches her attack on Hapes?"
"Pretty much. And depending on how things go with the Hapan thing, they might even launch a quick strike to grab the Hutt territory that currently falls under Hapan control. It will give them a power base in the Outer Rim from which they can strike from."
"All right, thanks again."
Yaqeel stood. "Not a problem, Jacen. You and your brother work out how to save the galaxy yet?"
"One step at a time," Jacen's smile was tired as he shook Yaqeel's hand. "Good luck out there."
"Oh, one last thing," Yaqeel turned just as she was about to step out the door. "There is a minority group of Bothans being led by Clan Ilar, who oppose the general course our people are heading in. They just don't have the votes or finances to overturn the True Victory Party decisions. The leader of the group, an Asyr Sei'lar, was recently placed under house arrest, but her organization still wants to bring Bothawui back into the Galactic Alliance. I wasn't sure who to tell this to, but hopefully you can use that information somehow."
Jacen offered Yaqeel a brief nod of acknowledgment, and the Bothan left the office. When she did, Jacen leaned forward and rubbed at his forehead.
"What's next on the schedule?"
"Break time," Nelani answered.
"Nelani," Jacen said warningly.
"Seha and I have been to enough of these meetings the past few days to know what you want, master," Nelani said reproachfully. "You on the other hand, haven't gotten more than an hour of sleep in that same amount of time. We'll handle the next meeting. It's the Outer Rim Relief Committee and its chairwoman is really nice."

"That's Senator Chuchi, right?" Jacen yawned.
"Yes," Nelani patted Jacen's arm. "She's already in favor of your reforms, has tons of experience helping other senators grow a conscience, if only for a vote or two. We just have to convince the other members of the committee that our plan won't strip the Outer Rim of the aid packages that have already been promised."
"That and we have to make sure that they're ready to take on the logistics of coordinating the reconstruction efforts on Outer Rim worlds," Seha added. "In addition to identifying worlds that need aid, they'll soon be responsible for making sure the appropriate aid goes to those worlds."
"Right, with the High Council cut out of the picture, the extra layer of bureaucracy will be gone too," Nelani finished.
"Besides, your mom gave us a cheat sheet we can use if we get in trouble," Seha held up a datapad, and through blurry eyes, Jacen could see the title of the document; *Tips for Politicking, a Quick Guide to Getting Things Done.*
"But are you sure…"
Nelani cut him off. "We got this master. *You* need some sleep. Don't make us find Master Jusik and have him give you a tranquilizer."
"Okay, okay, okay! I'll go back to my apartment and get some sleep."
"And some food, real food. Not those ready-to-eat garbage they serve the soldiers," Seha said. Jacen raised an eyebrow at her, but she didn't back down. "Your mom told us to take care of you, so that's what we're doing. Why do you think we got the cheat sheets in the first place?"
"Right, mom. How's her election campaign going?"
"Sleep," Seha folded her arms in front of her chest while Nelani emphatically pointed to the door and tapped a foot.
"Going," Jacen groaned, getting to his feet. He felt light-headed, and the morning light shining through the wide window caused him to grimace. Someone should develop a way to save the galaxy without having to sacrifice sleep. As he left his office, he could hear Nelani on a comm-call with someone. Before he could turn around, though, Seha closed the door behind him.
He briefly reached through the Force and found his brother. Not even breakfast yet and Anakin was neck-deep in some clandestine meeting to help Hapes gain the allies she needed. From his Force presence, Jacen could tell that even Anakin had endured a few sleepless nights. A check on his mom showed that Leia was hosting an early breakfast for several potential supporters for her run for office. She sent her regards, but also her worry, obviously sensing his exhaustion. Sending

his reassurance, Jacen caught a nearby taxi back to the highrise that contained his apartment.
He was barely aware of the trip over, or stumbling into his sparsely furnished room and to the utilitarian bed. His head barely touched the pillow before he was fast asleep.
(-(-(III)-)-)
It was the day before the big vote, and everyone was running around trying to secure last minute support, add in their own pet projects to the bill, or hide in their office until the craziness was over. The short nap Jacen had intended to take ended up being a full day's worth of sleep. And though he was grumpy at the time he had lost, he had to admit that the nap had rejuvenated his brain.
In that lost day, however, Luke Skywalker had arrived on Denon with Tekli, Janek, Cilghal, and Kam, creating almost as big a stir as Anakin's arrival. The arrival of the *Lady Luck*, escorted by the famed Jedi squadron *Wild Knights*, was still the topic of media pundits even a day after. Everyone was speculating as to why the 'former' Grandmaster of the Jedi Order had finally emerged from seclusion. Jacen had heard stories that his uncle was planning to support Kenth Hamner's 'Jedi-led' solution. There were also theories that Luke Skywalker was there to pressure senators into voting for his sister. Others said that his arrival signaled his willingness to once again lead the Jedi Order in a more active way. Most of the conversation surrounded the vote that was to come, however, and that even the famed Luke Skywalker recognized its significance.
For Jacen, the return of the *Wild Knights* meant the return of another old friend.
The doors to his office opened, and the tall reptilian form of Tesar Sebatyne entered.
"Tesar," Jacen offered the Barabel a genuine smile, rising from his chair. "Great to see you."
"Awake at last, Jacen," Tesar chortled. "Have any good dreamz at least?"
"None that I could remember." The two clasped each other's forearms in greeting. "Here, have a seat. How have the Wild Knights been? It's been a while since I heard about you guys."
"Piratez have been keeping uz busy," Tesar beamed, exposing the rows of sharp teeth in his mouth. "But when thiz one heard that Anakin Solo had returned, we decided to use our accumulated leave time. Thingz alwayz become ssso much more interesssssting when your brother concoctz hiz planz."

"Interesting wouldn't even cover what I think of his plans," Jacen laughed.
"If you have the time, I would introduce you to my hunting pack."
"I'd love to meet your squadron," Jacen said, he held up a datapad after it chimed. Scrolling through it, he raised an eyebrow "Apparently, I have the time now. My apprentices cleared my schedule for the day and are attending meetings in my place."
"Lucky you," Tesar said with a chuckle. "Come, I think you'll like the Wild Knightz."
"Mostly Barabel, right?" Jacen walked alongside his friend out of the room.
"Mostly," Tesar confirmed. "We have Arconian and Brubb too. A couple of humanz from Yavin Four'z praxeum were added to the mix. Thiz onez mother thought that they would have fun with the Knightz."
"Jacen!" Tekli's voice called out as he and Tesar passed through the dining commons of the Senate Building. The Chadra Fan healer was with Danni Quee and Lowbacca, chatting over a meal. "Hey Tesar!"
"Glad to see you're up," Danni grinned with a friendly wave.
"Tesar's going to introduce me to the Wild Knights? Feel like joining us?" Jacen offered.
The trio looked at each other and shrugged. "Sure, why not."
"So let's see. Lowie's here, Tesar's here. You're here, and so is Anakin and Tahiri," Danni listed off. "All we need now is to get Jaina, Tenel Ka, and Zekk back here somehow and it'll be just like old times."
"Which timez were those?" Tesar asked mirthfully. "The timez where we were running with our tailz between our legz as plasma exploded all around uz? Or the timez we hunted Yuuzhan Vong together and tried to make it to the next day?"
"At least Barabel humor hasn't changed since I left," Tekli said dryly. "But I will admit that I look forward to seeing everyone together again."
"So what have you all been up to while I was sleeping and sitting in meetings these past few days?" Jacen looked to the group.
"I was getting in contact with the R and D people, wanted to see how much we've advanced in the past seven years," Danni reported, her blond pony tail bobbing up and down as they walked. "Sanix Fous, that Imperial scientist, was tapped for my old post, so I had a couple of meals with him to get caught up. Not much need for a Yuuzhan Vong expert these days, so I'm thinking about going back to playing with stars. My degree was in astrophysics and not xenotechnology after all."
"[I was playing bodyguard for your mom,]" Lowbacca grumbled good-naturedly. "[Apparently having a Wookie present keeps the reporters from asking dumb questions. Can't figure out why though.]"

Jacen laughed at that. "Thank you, really, Lowie. One of the reasons I can do the things here is that I know you and Lumpy are looking out for my mom and dad. How about you, Tekli?"
"Nothing as glamorous," the Chadra Fan said wanly. "I'm putting together a holocron of all the abilities I developed when I was on Zonama Sekot. I noticed that the number of Jedi healers have increased, so hopefully my knowledge will prove beneficial to their training."
"We've definitely picked up quite a few since the end of the war," Jacen agreed.
"Master Cilghal is trying to convince me to pick up an apprentice, but I don't exactly know how long Anakin, Tahiri, and I are going to be in this galaxy," Tekli continued.
"If you were to stay, any possible candidates?"
"The boy Cassa was talking to, the one who's friends with the Cathar with the lung impairment," Tekli replied clinically. "Josat I think it was. He seems to have a kind heart and a natural affinity for the living Force. If Anakin decides to stay in this galaxy, I think I would like to take Josat on as my apprentice. The fact that the young boy has already made friends with a branch of the Solo family is merely a bonus."
"Any apprentices for you, Tesar?" Danni asked curiously.
Tesar hissed in negative. "The Wild Knightz are all Jedi Knightz. We will not risk our young in the fighters in the dangerouz missionz we undertake."
"That's a first," Danni blinked in surprise.
"Besidez," Tesar tilted his head. "There are not enough Jedi Apprenticez for all Knightz. We will let the nicer Knightz like Tekli take on the little onez."
They took a shuttle to the Jedi Temple, where the Wild Knights' fighters were parked. On the way, Jacen could already sense his brother, Tahiri, and their children inside the building. Apparently he wasn't the only one taking the day off before the big vote.
"So, Tesar," Danni said, lounging on the shuttle seat. "Is the Wild Knights still that odd mix of fighters, freighters, and gunboats?"
"Of courez," Tesar chuckled. "We have three different types of X-wingz, an Eta-Five Interceptor, three A-wingz, two B-wingz, and Blastboatz. We also have the *Gnashing Teeth*, an X4 gunship."
"And who gets you all these ships?" Danni asked. "I remember back in the war the Wild Knights were given military surplus and aging fighters, that's why they were all mixed up."

Tesar's tongue flicked out and tasted the air almost casually. "Like most Jedi squadronz these dayz, many of the fighterz we get are rewardz from local governmentz and businesses. We received the Eta-Five after protecting a KDY shipyard from pirate attack. The *Gnashing Teeth* waz given to uz after we rescued the children of a shipping baron from kidnappers. The X-wingz are surplus, az are the A-wingz. The B-wings were brought piece by piece with Jedi Order fundz. The blastboatz we've had since the war."

"So the High Council and Senate don't have any role in arming the Jedi Order?" Danni continued, her curiosity getting the better of her. "I've always wondered how the Jedi squadrons would stay solvent once the war was over. Fuel, parts, warheads, maintenance of the fighters, the upkeep was taken care of the by Galactic Alliance Navy during the war. Is that still the case?"

"Partially," Tesar admitted. "The Jedi Temple on Denon iz the only place where Jedi have mechanics of their own. When in the field, we rely on the nearest Galactic Alliance fleet group for support. Not every politician and high ranking officer iz happy with the arrangement, az we are mostly a paramilitary force outside of the regular chain-of-command. We use their material, their people and partz, but don't report to them unless ordered to do so by the High Council."

"The reforms Anakin and Jacen are trying to pass," Tekli frowned. "Would that not hurt the Jedi Order in the long run?"

Jacen grimaced. "That's one of the downsides to separating the Jedi Order from the Galactic Alliance's political structure, yes. But the alternative is to have the galaxy continuously looking to the few squadrons like the Wild Knights to solve all their military problems. Tesar will probably be the first to agree with me when I say that we don't have nearly enough Jedi, or even ships, to match the demand. Having the Jedi as part of the political system only increases that demand every time a new problem pops up. Hopefully the Order can negotiate with the Galactic Alliance armed forces after the reforms and put together our own agreement. Something similar to what the Bakurans have, where our forces will help out when called upon, but have the right to maintain their own command structure. Believe me, all the individual details are a pain to think about, and until the Senate decides which of the reform packages they prefer, Anakin and I can't do much anyways."

The shuttle docked in front of the Jedi Temple, and the group made their way up to the hangar where the Wild Knights had parked. When the doors to the lift opened, the sound of children laughing and light-

hearted conversation greeted them, and Jacen had to almost smile at the sight.
"That's right," Zeltron Jedi Apprentice 'Raxi' smiled, half-Miraluka Apprentice Siare next to her. "Seha's kind of like my little sister."
"But you're pink and Seha isn't!" Cassa pointed out, trying to wrap her head around the fact. "All pink, with blue hair! Did you color your skin? I once smeared these blue berries on my face to look like my Yuuzhan Vong friends, did you smear pink berries on yourself? "
"No," Raxi laughed. "Zeltron are naturally like that. You told me about Jedis'sei, your good friend, right?"
Cassa nodded mutely.
"Okay, then Seha's kind of like that to me. We're really good friends, so much so that we're like sisters."
"Okay," Cassa nodded, clearly not understanding.
The Barabel Jedi pilots nearby hissed in amusement. "Do not fret, little Solo. We often don't understand the relationz between other speciez as well."
"Oh, thanks Dordi," Cassa brightened. She approached Raxi and experimentally poked at the Zeltron's arm, and then tried to 'rub the pink off,' causing Raxi to grin fondly at the pint-sized human. The others in the hangar were just as amused, chuckling and entertaining Janek, and Ben and Kani.
"So this fighter is over thirty years old?" Ben gestured to one of the X-wings. "Wow."
"Strange thing about war," another Barabel pilot said with a smile. "It sparkz innovation. But when the war iz over, everyone iz poor like today, and no one can make the new shipz. With the war over there also isn't any reason to make the new shipz, so all the old shipz remain in service. Thiz fighter still has teeth though."
"Can I see what it's like inside?" Kani asked. Her request was met by one of the Wild Knights using the Force to float her into the cockpit.
"Having a family outing in the hangar of the Jedi Temple?" Jacen laughed, seeing the antics of both the younger and older Jedi.
"Jacen," Tahiri welcomed the newcomers with a broad smile. Her youngest was cradled against her, sleeping peaceful in the positive vibe of the hangar. "Danni, Tekli, Lowie, Tesar."
"Hey," Jacen waved. "Things going okay?"
"As okay as they can be," Tahiri smiled wanly. "Great to see you back on your feet."
After a round of introductions to the half-dozen Wild Knights present, Jacen sat down next to his younger brother and just watched the younger generation play with the reptilian pilots.

"I have some good news, Jacen," Anakin floated a bottle of juice over to his brother. "Most of the treaties Lady Miilarta and I were working on are just about done. In a couple of days, we'll be able to put together a task force for Hapes under the auspices of the Intergalactic Hapan Alliance."
"That's great," Jacen brightened. But then, as he did, something Yaqeel said to him recycled its way back to the front of his mind. "Hey Anakin, how sure are you that the Bothan-Yuuzhan Vong conflict is a linchpin?"
"Just seemed like one," Anakin answered, looking cautious and stepping to the side. "Why?"
"Before I went to sleep, I had Yaqeel check on a few things for me," Jacen replied, keeping his voice light and his emotions shielded. "She told me something that's only now starting to raise a few flags." Jacen then went on to relay the conversation, keeping careful eye on his brother's reaction.
"So, you're saying that the Bothan- Yuuzhan Vong conflict isn't a ripple starter, just the result of the Hapan-Corellian ripple?"
"It makes sense," Jacen confirmed. "The Bothans are opportunists and see the Hapan-Corellian conflict as a way to mask their own activities. Their hate for the Yuuzhan Vong also makes it really easy for them to be affected by outside events."
"So that means we're either missing something big, or there are only two linchpins this year," Anakin scratched the back of his head in thought. "I wondered why the puppet masters were mixing the Bothans into the Hapan-Corellian conflict." After another moment, Anakin shook his head again. "But that still doesn't change much. The Yuuzhan Vong already are fuming. If we can't find some way to stop the Bothans and bring the planners of the attack to justice, we're still going to have an angry Yuuzhan Vong fleet charging back into this galaxy."
"Or the Bothan fleet charging Zonama Sekot," Jacen agreed.
Anakin rolled his eyes and glanced over to his brother. "Yeah, that too."
Jacen had to laugh at that. "It takes hundreds of systems and a crumbling government to ruin things. And we're supposed to be the guiding lights slapping everything back together? Regret coming back here, Anakin?"
Anakin smiled faintly. "To be honest, no. It's kind of nice, you know…" He gestured absently at where Cassa and Janek were now playing 'make Barabel hissing noises' at the Wild Knight pilots. "I think Cassa likes it here too. Well, apart from the whole gloom and doom. On Zonama, the only Force-sensitives she could talk with were me, Tahiri,

Jedis'sei, Danni, Tekli, and Sekot. Here…well, I think she likes being 'normal' instead of a child of two deities."
"And you and Tahiri?" Jacen asked curiously. "Tekli said she wasn't sure if you'd be staying in this galaxy or not once everything's over."
Anakin shrugged. "The longer I'm here, the more inclined I am to stay…I…I did miss being able to talk with you, you know. Missed Jaina going crazy over the stupid little things I do."
"But…?"
"But, to have that. To have the rest of my family and friends and this galaxy I once called home, I have to accept both the good and the bad," Anakin sighed. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but Zonama Sekot has to be one of the most *unbalanced* places in the Force ever."
"Oh?"
"Sekot is inherently 'good,'" Anakin tried to explain. "All glowy with the Light Side of the Force if you will. All that light, nurturing, healing, and peaceful. It's a nice reprieve, but it's not real. Sure there may be a conflict or two that springs up, but Sekot pretty much regulates everything. There is no balance if you have no *real* conflict, and though existing in a world with no strife and worry is nice…it's *wrong* in many ways."
"I understand what you're saying," Jacen nodded. "Both the Chalactan Adepts and the Bakurans believe in similar philosophies. There is a natural law to the universe that all living things adhere to whether they realize it or not. Acts of good deeds are balanced out elsewhere in the galaxy with bad. The greater the good on the surface, the greater the strife brewing beneath. You can't just have 'good,' the light side of the Force, without there being 'bad' somewhere in the galaxy."
"So maybe the peace I was enjoying on Zonama Sekot was the counter balance for this galaxy," Anakin posited, leaning back against the starfighter behind him. "After all, the Jedi Order was just hitting its stride when things started to fall apart. Light countered by dark."
"Well it's now the 'dark's' turn to be countered," Jacen said. "Force knows the galaxy's seen enough pain and suffering to last several lifetimes. A Zonama-like reprieve *would* be nice."
Little did the occupants of the hangar know, but their brief break from the politics and dangers of the galaxy would be their last for a long while.
(-(-(IV)-)-)
"I call this session of the Galactic Alliance Senate into order," Chief of State Cal Omas announced, looking well-rested and optimistic. "Let the records reflect the attendance of *all* elected senators or their designated representative. I would also like to welcome all the heads

of state who have traveled here to be a part of this reshaping of the galactic government. Let us all hope that history will look back on this day as a turning point of our galaxy."
While the speech echoed throughout the Senate Chambers, Jacen sat together with his family and friends in one of the observation decks; deliberately leaving the seat of Jedi Senator empty. He would still cast his vote, but the symbolic representation of an empty Jedi Senate chair would speak volumes.
Sitting in an observation deck opposite of their position was Kenth Hamner and several other politicians and Jedi who agreed with his point of view. It was hard not to look in each other's direction considering a giant holoscreen that would tally the votes was fastened to the wall on either side of the room. The Jedi Master's face was impassive, arms folded in front of his chest. It almost appeared as if he were meditating given his relaxed demeanor.
That was in contrast with the Solo-Skywalker and friends balcony, where the nervous tension translated right down to an anxious Cassa and frowning Janek.
"Mommy?" Cassa hopped out of her seat and crawled into her mom's lap.
Tahiri gently wrapped an arm around her daughter's mid-section.
"We're just worried about the vote, Cassa. That's all. If enough people don't agree with your daddy's and uncle's plan, Jacen and your daddy will get all frowny."
"And full of negatude," Cassa said sagely.
"Exactly," Tahiri beamed.
"Your Jedi senses telling you anything, Luke?" Han asked in a low voice.
"Do you want the Jedi Master answer or my gut feeling?" Luke whispered back over his shoulder.
"Both," Han muttered.
"The Jedi Master in me will tell you to take a deep breath and that whatever happens is the will of the Force."
"And the always more helpful gut feeling?" Han said sarcastically.
"Has faith that the people will do the right thing in the end," Luke replied. "I'm only worried at how close the vote might be. It won't bode well for anyone if Jacen and Anakin's reforms pass only by a slim margin."
"Will that matter though? It'll have still passed."
"A close vote means either one of several things, dad," Jacen voiced, being seated next to his uncle. "Chiefly being, either the guys orchestrating the conflicts have way more influence and power than

either Anakin or I predicted, or the galaxy is so badly fractured that even the reforms won't do much. You can't help a single country, much less an entire galaxy if the politicians running it are so polarized in their beliefs that nothing gets done."
"So if that happens?"
Jacen glanced back over his shoulder at his parents. "Jedi aren't supposed to deal in the 'what ifs' of this galaxy. It's one thing to try and use the Force to see the future, but it's an entirely other thing all together to try and react to every single possible future out there. You'd go insane, or even cause the very event you were trying to stop, or worse. The only thing you *can* do is react to the present."
"Luke teach you that?"
"Vergere."
"By the way, where is she?" Mara asked, taking a moment to scan the Senate Chamber in hopes of seeing the enigmatic avian Jedi. "I haven't seen her around at all. Haven't seen her since, well, when you came back."
"Not sure," Jacen replied. "Once I returned from my little journey around the galaxy, she said she had nothing more to teach me and went her own way. Given everything we're facing, I'm not exactly worried about her; she can take care of herself."
"I'm sure," Mara said sourly.
"We can consider this a trial run for next year's elections," Leia continued on in a low voice to her husband. "If people truly want the Jedi in power, they'll side with Hamner and I'll have to adjust my platform based on those results."
"So if they reject Kenth's reforms, that's a good thing?" Han muttered.
"It depends on how you define 'good thing'," Leia chuckled dryly. "On one hand, we don't want the results to be close. On the other hand, we don't want an outright rejection of his plan. An outright rejection would mean the galaxy has entirely lost faith with the Jedi Order and will be all too eager to strip it of *any* power and influence."
"Mommy," Cassa suddenly spoke up, tugging on Tahiri's sleeve. "Something's wrong."
"Wrong?" Tahiri frowned, tilting her head curiously. "What do you mean?"
"We feel it too," Ben said, gesturing to Kani with his head. Janek had crawled up into Mara's lap in silent distress. "Something's off with the Force."
Puzzled, the Jedi members in the booth rose to their feet and scanned the area with their eyes and with the Force. Meanwhile the non-Force sensitive members stood helplessly as the children began shivering.

In the background, as if nothing was amiss, Cal Omas was wrapping up the procedure for the vote. "Votes for both proposals will be taken at the same time. Only one vote will be allowed. If you do not believe that either proposal are paths this government should undertake, however, senators will be allowed to vote in the negative for both proposals. Given the three potential outcomes, a simple majority will be all that is needed. Now this is a reminder, though these reforms propose a direction this government will head, it only lays the barest of groundwork. More detailed reforms and restructuring will be voted on at a later time pending the results of today. Now, if the esteemed members of this Senate can cast their votes and we'll…"

A dull buzzing could be heard from the microphone speakers, growing in intensity. After a moment, the buzzing noise seemed to fill the entire Senate Chamber, coming not just from the speakers, but from the walls, the ceiling, and the floor, everywhere. Senate members warily stood, the security personnel drawing their blasters but seeing nothing wrong.

"Something's coming." Jacen's eyes flew open, using the Force, he pulled away several of his friends and family from the doorway. "Get away from the doors and vents!"

A split second later, a pure black swarm of creatures burst out from every crevice, seam, vent, and open door like a tidal wave of glimmering black liquid metal. It wasn't just the Solo-Skywalker booth, but from every corner of the Senate Chamber.

Screams of terror and alarm went up.

One of the security guards fired his blaster at the swirling mass, only to attract its attention onto him. The black tide consumed him, quite literally, diving upon the hapless guard and ripping through him like bullets. Other senators caught up in the tidal wave disappeared with strangled cries. The almost liquid-like wave of creatures swept through each tier of the Senate Chamber at breakneck speeds, not stopping for anyone that was in their path. Occasional popping sounds indicated when the creatures broke the sound-barrier in their rush around the chamber.

Blood began to spill out of some of the platforms, staining the ground below.

"What are those things!?" A wide-eyed Seha managed, hiding herself behind Nelani and Jacen. Even then, the black swarm surrounded their booth from every direction, the buzz nearly deafening in volume.

"Bugs," Jacen said, he held out his hand and sent one of the tendril-like arms of the swarm flying away. Below the platform, they could see

several bodies covered in a small layer of bugs, feasting on the unfortunate victims. "Lots and lots and lots of bugs."
The emergency forcefield around the Chief of State's platform held, protecting Cal Omas and his staff, before the platform sank out of sight through an emergency exit. But everywhere not protected by a Jedi was being inundated by the seemingly unstoppable mass.
"There has to be millions of those things!" Nelani yelled.
"Anakin, Jacen, we need to try and save as many Senators as we can!" Leia barked out. "If the government collapses, the chaos we're seeing now is nothing to what will happen then!"
Both brothers exchanged nods and drew their lightsabers. "We can use the Force to keep them back. We'll start here and create a path to the exit."
"Tahiri, you take Cassa and…" Anakin paused seeing the glare his wife was leveling at him. "And back me up. A giant whirlwind should probably hold these creatures long enough." He made a twirling motion with his finger while looking at his daughter. "Cass, just like Sekot taught us on Zonama. Mom, do you think you can take Jayce?"
Leia cradled the infant with the utmost of care. "Good luck."
"We'll keep the hallways clear," Luke gestured to his own branch of the family.
"Right," Jacen agreed. "Nelani, Seha, we'll need you to start gathering up any survivors. We'll try to keep the path open as long as we can."
"You can count on us."
"Ready?" Mara checked on everyone and was met with a series of nods. "Then go!"
One moment, it seemed like chaos was reigning. The tendrils of the swarm were even venturing back out into the hallways to pick off those who had managed to escape.
The next, there was a powerful explosion of Force energy directly in the center of the Senate Chamber.
Jacen was thoroughly awed by the output his younger brother, wife, and their daughter emitted, all three holding out their hands and eyes closed in concentration. A massive cyclone appeared directly in the center of the room, acting like a giant bug vacuum cleaner. The winds it kicked up buffeted clothing, debris, and loose objects with cyclonic force, but appeared to leave anyone who wasn't a tiny black, homicidal bug alone.
To say that his brother, sister-in-law, and niece, had kicked up a giant tornado would have been a dramatic understatement. The Senate Chamber was a cavernous room designed to seat comfortably delegates from all corners of the galaxy. A single individual was

dwarfed by the sheer size of the room and the seemingly impossibly tall ceiling. A transparasteel skylight allowed the sunlight to shine in, illuminating the central Chief of State's platform. Even then, that lone platform was almost lost among the sea of thousands of others that surrounded it. A person with normal human eye sight could barely see any details of a person on the opposite side of the room. But despite the monumental size of the room, Anakin, Tahiri, and Cassa appeared up for the challenge.

A column of sheer Force-created wind that stretched all the way up into the ceiling and spanned nearly sixty meters in diameter, undulated in the center of the room with terrifying power; sucking in any bug in its path. The pillar-like creature only seemed to grow in diameter as the seconds passed, drawing in bugs from every tier of the Senate Chamber and into its inescapable grasp.

Take care of the strays, Jace. Jacen heard his brother direct, clothing and hair being buffeted by the powerful Force-controlled winds..

Having to smirk in amazement, Jacen closed his own eyes and reached out to touch the swarm with his unique brand of Force energy. He stretched out his presence throughout the Senate building, using the swarm's hive-mentality against it to track down the miniscule presence of every tiny bug that wasn't in the Senate Chamber.

He tried to insert the idea that a predator was coming and that it was better to return to the rest of the swarm, but he sensed a powerful mind counter his suggestion. Nearly losing his concentration in surprise, he quickly catalogued what he was sensing for another time. Then, he decided to switch tactics, using the bugs' commands against them. Instead of trying to dissuade them of their goal, or have them flee, he instead hinted at more survivors regrouping in the Senate Chamber and that the rest of the swarm was full. The effect was immediate as more black tendrils of bugs swarmed back into the main chamber. He repeated the suggestion to each patch of bugs he found in the building, keeping an eye on his apprentices as they quickly began helping shell-shocked survivors out of the room and into a hallway secured by Luke and Mara.

Anakin, Tahiri, and Cassa's Force-whirlwind-bug-vacuum, immediately snared the newcomers, the vortex's howling winds now nearly completely black from the sheer number of creatures trapped within. As powerful as the Solos were, however, even they couldn't maintain the whirlwind indefinitely. As the strain began to mount, they held onto each other's hands even tighter. Cassa was between her parents, her small forehead scrunched with the effort to help her parents keep the bugs from hurting anyone else. Anakin and Tahiri were on either side,

a sense of calm awareness stemming from both of them even as they approached their limits.
"Seha! Nelani! Hurry it up!" Jacen called out. Another source of movement caught his attention, and he suddenly remembered that his family hadn't been the only Jedi present at the meeting. Those in Kenth Hamner's booth, now no longer having to worry about warding off millions of bugs, had caught on to what Seha and Nelani were doing and rushing to help.
A minute and a half, max. Jacen heard in his mind.
Finishing redirecting the last of the wayward swarms, Jacen reached out through the Force and touched the minds of Kenth Hamner and his Jedi followers. Despite their differences in opinions and techniques for fixing the galaxy, they were all still Jedi, all still devoted to protecting those who could not. He formed the basis for a meld, hoping that the others would pick up on what he was doing. When he began to feel their strength pour into him, he released a breath and redirected that strength to his younger brother.
The minutes ticked by, filled with tension. The deafening, angry buzz of the insect swarm nearly drowned out by the howling winds being created by the youngest of the Solo children and his family. The room was almost clear of survivors and those badly wounded, when several squads of security forces led by Han Solo rushed into the room. Nearly all of them were equipped with flamethrowers. The security forces froze in surprise at the sight of a giant bug-filled tornado, but managed to regain their wits after only a second.
"Just a few more seconds longer, kiddo!" Han yelled up at his son.
"A few more seconds is all they can manage," Jacen supplied for his younger brother.
The security forces took positions on multiple levels all around the spiraling hurricane of bugs. On command, the flamethrowers were activated, and sheets of blue flame were pumped into the column of air. The effect was luminescent and spell-binding. The flame quickly raced up the shaft of swirling air, incinerating everything caught within in the blink of an eye. A shriek of rage sounded through the Force as the last of the bugs lit up like tinder, staggering many of the Jedi in the room. Pure hatred, rage, murderous intent, bombarded them all as the millions of bugs disappeared in the inferno.
In response, Anakin, Tahiri, and Cassa sent the flaming column up out the skylight, where it exploded in a dazzling display of charred bug and fiery ash. The intense dark emotions disappeared almost as quickly as they had come, leaving everyone in the Senate building completely bewildered and numb at what had just occurred.

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It only took a cursory investigation to discover just exactly how a giant swarm of insects had gotten in one of the most secured buildings on the planet. The swarms had gotten past the outer layers of security because they had already been in the building to begin with. The source of the swarm were the meter-and-a-half high, spinglass, war memorial busts that had been gifted to every senator only two months earlier and had resided in each of their offices since then. There were several thousand offices representing planets and sectors around the galaxy, and several thousand corresponding spinglass busts. The tops of each of the busts were open, revealing an entirely hollow inside. Several thousand bug-filled statues acting as ticking bombs, waiting for the right moment to go off.

And go off they did.

The much harder investigation was now determining where the statues had come from. The pressure on the investigators was immense, as several hundred senators and planetary heads had lost their lives in the alarming attack. There was no stopping the news from getting out either, and the galaxy had quickly learned about the attack on the Senate Chamber itself.

Senators were fleeing back to their home systems in shiploads. But worse was the fact that the attackers appeared to have planned for this and pirate attacks on Senatorial vessels filled the news for the next few days. A few dozen more senators were lost to the raids before the Galactic Alliance Navy managed to get into position to offer escorts to the other hundreds of senators fleeing Denon. This in turn lessened the presence of the navy elsewhere in the galaxy, and the pirates in those regions went fully active.

Cal Omas rallied valiantly to pull his government back together, but the damage had been done. There was no longer any confidence in his administration and the remaining senators were pushing en masse for an early vote to remove him from power.

Kenth Hamner was using Anakin's whirlwind as an example that only a Jedi could save this galaxy from the decay that had set in. His running mate, Cha Niathal, likewise pointed out the flaws in security and how the senators were hoarding Galactic Alliance resources for their own protection while other parts of the galaxy suffered. 'Much like the senators of the pre-Yuuzhan Vong War era, the senators of today care only for their own power and lives,' she told several media outlets. Intentional or not, Kenth Hamner's popularity in the Galactic Alliance Senate seemed to skyrocket. He was calling for someone extraordinary to make the difference the galaxy needed, and it was clear that

ordinary politicians just wouldn't fit that mold, regardless of their last name.
"What a mess," Jacen groaned, falling into his shredded leather chair. He hadn't bothered to clean up his office, so shattered transparasteel, wood, and metal shards, and all manner of debris covered his carpeted floor. The war memorial bust sat where it had always been, by the window, only now it was missing its top in an ever-present reminder of what had just occurred.
"Just got word from the embedded reporters with the Remnant," Nelani looked mournfully at the decimated couch and decided to stand behind it instead. "The Chiss are getting hammered pretty bad. For all their posturing, they weren't ready for the war. Analysts are predicting that Csilla will fall within the month. Read in between the lines though, and it appears as if the Remnant's changed their fleet tactics and the Chiss aren't adapting fast enough."
Seha, who likewise had a datapad full of information, sat in front of the ragged couch. "Situation in Hapes isn't all that much better. If the reports out of the Consortium can be believed, a thousand assassins guided by the Force tried to kill the Queen Mother only a day after the attack on the Senate. Not much details, only that the assassins had all been killed and that the Consortium fleets are mobilizing. Corellian ships are still nowhere to be seen though, so not sure if that's good or bad. War, civil or otherwise, appears likely to break out very soon, though. And if that happens, the Bothans…"
Jacen closed his eyes once more, his brain working overdrive in an attempt to find the least distasteful solution to it all. The Galactic government was at a standstill, the Outer Rim in disarray, and infighting and finger pointing was tearing everything apart.
"What this galaxy doesn't need right now is more division," Jacen breathed slowly. "What would you two think if I decided to support Kenth Hamner and his run for office?"
"Against your own mom?"
"No, I'll try to convince her to drop out. It was partly our fault anyways that she decided to run in the first place."
"So you're giving up?" Nelani frowned.
"Not giving up. Just choosing the 'when' in terms of the battles I fight," Jacen massaged his temples, recalling one of the many lessons he had learned in his travels. It might be possible to win a battle in the here and now, but would cause a chain of events unfavorable to the ultimate goal. If that battle is lost, and then won in at a later time, events would be more favorable. "Let's say we let the no confidence vote go ahead, and then have the vote for new Chief of State. If the

galaxy stays fractured between Kenth Hamner's group and mom's, then nothing will truly change. At the same time, if we give Kenth a chance to work out *his* plan, then the Jedi will be in a much better position to step down from power later. In some ways, as divided as this galaxy is, a benevolent dictator might be just what it needs."
"And you were lecturing me about the dangers of a Force sensitive leading the galaxy," Nelani countered. "What changed your mind?"
"We're running out of time," Jacen muttered, looking dissatisfied with his own conclusions. His eyes took on a distant gleam as visions of possible futures came to him through the Force. "Time to act. We already failed to stop the Chiss-Remnant conflict. Anakin and I failed to see the attack on the Senate. And now the Hapan Corellian conflict is nearing its tipping point. If that topples over, the Bothans will attack Zonama Sekot, and the galaxy will be plunged into an ever spiraling cycle of war and revenge. On top of it all, we're no closer to discovering the culprits of the attack than we were four years ago when the crime sprees started. The arguing among allies needs to stop so *something* can get done." Jacen gazed out the shattered window of his office, then, much more quietly whispered. "Maybe I *should have* accepted Kenth's offer to become Chief of State. Then I would be able to…"
Jacen breathed out, shaking his head and dismissing the idea. "Never mind that."
"Did the intelligence people discover what those bugs were?" Nelani tried to change the topic. "I mean, there were millions of them right?"
"Most of them were burnt to a crisp though," Jacen answered in the negative. "From what little the teams recovered, well, witness accounts told them more. Each bug had a metallic body, was hardly larger than a centimeter, but could travel at hypersonic speeds. When I linked up with them to try and force them back into the chamber, they acted together through a hive mind. But they weren't in control of that mind, someone else was giving them orders through the Force. It felt…."
His apprentices looked at him in concern as he trailed off again. He couldn't blame them given the expression that must have appeared on his face. It had been nearly a week since the attack and things had only now just begun to settle down enough for him to reflect on what he had felt. But as the memory came to him, he was jolted by the realization.
"Raynar Thul," Jacen whispered, gripping his desk tightly. He tried to recall what he had felt, the murderous impulse being injected into the swarm's mind. Then, he recalled the shriek of anger and rage that

occurred when the swarm was eliminated in one fell swoop. "No, impossible. He's dead."
"Master?" Nelani had approached him, her Force probes encountering the impermeable mental barriers he had set up. "What's…who's Raynar? Wait, do you mean Myrkr's Raynar? Master?"
"I…I have to talk with my brother," Jacen shot to his feet, his heart pounding. If Raynar had survived, it stood to reason that Welk and Lomi did too. And if the three of them were somehow tangled up in the events… He let his mind run wild as he left his office. He was vaguely aware of his apprentices following him, but temporarily tuned them out.
One thing was certain, something had to have happened to Raynar, and perhaps Lomi and Welk too, for the fallen Jedi to be able to control that swarm of bugs. It may have been a hive mind, but to influence millions of living creatures from a far distance took a whole lot of concentration and effort. Especially if the swarm was able to break off into smaller packs to hunt down those who had ran away.
He tracked down his younger brother; who was with Tahiri, Cassa, and Jayce in the Senate Chambers helping people repair the ravaged room.
"Jacen," Anakin turned, obviously sensing his older brother's distress in the Force. "What's wrong?"
"Anakin, do you think you can recreate the Myrkr Battle Meld?" Jacen said in a rush, his heart pounding.
"The Battle Meld?" Anakin blinked, taken aback.
"Humor me," Jacen nodded. "Given your 'little' whirlwind in this chamber, it shouldn't be a problem link up all of us, even if we're on the other side of the galaxy."
Anakin raised an eyebrow and nodded once. Leaving the Senate Chamber and following his brother into an unused office, Anakin sat cross-legged in the center of the room. "Here goes nothing."
Just as before, the Force coalesced around Anakin in an almost tangible aura, the air around him swirling slightly as he called upon the vast reserves he had within him. Jacen felt the brush against his mind, and joined the meld, feeling Tahiri already present, and Tesar and Tekli join in seconds later. Last of the Myrkr Team left on Denon, Lowbacca's presence arrived with a questioning rawl.
Though sending anything more than emotional impressions or simple thought-pictures was all but impossible for most Jedi given the vast distance all of them were spread out, the unique Myrkr Battle Meld—forged in combat, friendship, and love—allowed whole sentences and ideas to traverse the stars.

Give it a few minutes, Lowie. Jacen thought. *If what I think will happen happens, we're in for a galaxy of trouble.*
Aren't we already in a galaxy of trouble? Lowbacca sent back, settling comfortably in the meld.
Anakin released a breath, and the others lent him their strength as he began to reach across the stars for the wayward members of their group. Faint, obviously surprised and elated, Jaina's mind touched base with everyone.
ANAKIN!
Hi ya, Jaya. Anakin sent youthfully. *Wanna meet your niece?*
Jaina's emotions rippled through their bond, the intensity of them temporarily boosting her otherwise weak link. Her every emotion was on display, cycling rapidly from one to another, from her amazement, joy, sorrow, anger, annoyance, relief, thankfulness, all the way to resignation. As if she should have expected Anakin to do something like he was doing. When Jaina finally managed to get comfortable into the meld, she had settled on rueful, chastising her little brother in a way only an older sister could.
Jace, wanna take the lead for Hapes? Anakin grimaced playfully.
Jacen nodded silently, stretching out the groups' combined psyche towards the ever intriguing Hapan Consortium. All at once he could feel the woman he loved, and she appeared startled at the re-establishment of a nearly decade-old bond between friends. The group sent their greetings, and a surge of fondness was sent back in turn. After a moment's pause, Tenel Ka's powerful presence added to the strength of a bond that stretched across the stars.
A couple more, Tekli's hopeful thoughts were heard by all.
Zekk's presence, weak and thready, limped into the meld to the concern of all involved. *I'm okay…mostly.*
We are having a…complicated time in Hapes. Tenel Ka's thoughts echoed distantly.
The group reached out to help shoulder their burdens and alleviate any pain or discomfort. It was then that Jacen detected the additional bond still attached to Zekk. His attention and alertness drew the scrutiny of the rest.
Zekk? Tekli's frown felt by all.
Very bad headache, don't remember much. Came the almost inaudible thoughts from their longtime friend.
Is this everyone then? Lowbacca growled.
One more, Tahiri said.
Who? Tesar hissed.

The last of the Myrkr survivors arrived, her dark presence not missed by anyone.
Alema! Several voices called out in a storm of different emotions.
Hello all. The blue Twi'lek's greeting was distant, distracted, as if she was standing on a mountain top away from the gathering below, voice nearly lost in the cosmic wind.
The same bond that was attached to Zekk was much more prevalent in their missing friend, and this time everyone could sense it.
Zekk, Alema, what have you two gotten yourselves into? Tahiri chided the two of them.
Nice to hear from you too, Tahiri. Zekk sent back, his comment tinged with humor.
So, Little Brother, what's the occasion? Jaina asked.
Jacen's running the show, I'm just the long-distance comm-relay. Alema, Zekk. Jacen began. *Do you mind if we trace that bond attached to the two of you back to its source?*
I…go ahead. Zekk's thoughts were rapidly becoming muddled, his presence weakening to the point where it nearly dropped out of the meld altogether.
Alema didn't reply, the group getting nothing from the dark cloud that surrounded her presence.
Here goes nothing. Using the Force in ways he had learned from Vergere during the war, as well as a few new tricks he had picked up in his travels, Jacen took the entire group down the intangible strands that clung to both Alema and Zekk's presences.
It was unlike anything any of them had ever experienced. Due to his skill and abilities, however, Jacen immediately detected the danger before the others. All at once millions of minds reached out for theirs, yanking hard on the bond attached to Zekk and Alema and threatening to pull all of them into a morass of corrupted Force energy. Whatever it was was using the bond of the Battle Meld to reach each of them, trying to rope each of them into the million-mind entity that hid in the darkness. The attack was almost overwhelming both in its scale and suddenness.
But for Jacen, who had spent four years training in some of the most arcane and unique Force technique, even the combined might of a million minds was no match for him. With a thought, he shrunk everyone's Force presences, making them so small they slipped between the outstretched minds attempting to grab them. Another thought and he effortlessly backtracked the attackers to its source. It wasn't that hard considering that, with the attack, the Battle Meld had re-established a link to one more individual.

Hello, Raynar Thul. It's great to see you survived too. Jacen greeted with a calmness that surprised even himself. The instant he made contact, he and the rest of the meld could also sense Lomi and Welk's presences lurking in the background. The shock felt by everyone was enough to break Jacen's concentration, and Raynar's mind was suddenly buried beneath the millions of others. The attack on the Battle Meld promptly withdrew, like a hand that had just passed over an open flame.
Zekk, Alema, want those voices in your head to go away? Anakin offered.
Yes, please. Zekk sent back, his relief striking a chord in the meld.
We are good. Alema said in negative. *It is rather comforting, not being alone in this galaxy.*
Before anyone could stop her, Alema withdrew from the meld. Bemusement and worry echoed through the meld, before it was decided that nothing could be done for Alema at the moment. Concentrating instead on their friend on Hapes, the meld began to work at the parasitical Force bond gnawing at his consciousness. It tried to fight their efforts, but the moment Jacen made his presence the dominant one in the meld, the resistance faded away almost fearfully. The meld then resumed their work, snipping away the last of the unwanted Force Bond and then shoring up the vulnerable part of Zekk's mind.
Can't get rid of all of it, Jacen sent*. Raynar's still connected to all of us after all.*
Loads better than before though, thanks.
Anytime, Tekli thought.
Can't stay here much longer, Jaina suddenly said. *Little Brother, please don't surprise me like that again. You were lucky all I was doing was waiting for an important meeting to begin. Caught me just in time.*
Sorry, Anakin sent back.
We'll talk later you two. Jaina added, sending affection towards her younger brother and Tahiri. She then eased herself out of the meld.
Killiks! Lomi! Zekk's thought accompanied an image of an army of bipedal insects and mountain-sized nests. *Now I remember. They're in the Hapan Sector. They're the ones behind the Heritage Council's movements! Its leaders are compromised.*
Truly? Tenel Ka's concern escaped her controlled shields. *Then we must return our attention to the matters at hand as well, friend Zekk. Everyone, it has be pleasant to see all of you unharmed. Until next time.*

Tenel Ka and Zekk both withdrew next. With the trans-galactic Force-meld now ended, the Solo brothers were able to refocus the meld for those on Denon.
Bugs, Anakin's groan mirrored the resignation felt by Tekli and Tahiri. *Why does it always have to be bugs?*
It explainz the attack on the Senate. Tesar supplied, his mind switching to hunting mode. This in turn resonated through the meld, making the others have a sudden urge to hunt down bugs. *The small creaturez were Killik too.*
If I recall mom's stories about Alderaan, there were many different types of bugs all classified as Killik, Jacen supplied. *But I also recall mom saying that the Killiks were a peaceful people.*
Not so anymore, Lowbacca commented. *Something might have provoked them, or maybe in the thousands of years since they have been seen, their nature might have changed.*
In any case, we need to talk with the High Council while it's still in one piece. Anakin said. *Because I don't know about you, but being an exterminator for a bunch of telepathic, Jedi absorbing, Force-sensitive bugs was not exactly something I was trained for.*
Before we hunt them down, we have to first find out <u>why</u> they're attacking, Jacen disagreed. He pulled out of the meld to address his brother. "And how Raynar, Lomi, and Welk are involved in this. Until we find out their motives, we won't know when the Killiks will strike next. They've already started a war between the Chiss and the Imperials, decimated the senate, have the Corellians and Hapans at each other's throats, and sponsored a five year crime wave. We need to find out what their goal is before launching any sort of attack."
"And then what?" Anakin argued. "While we're searching for a reason, we wait until they attack again? Wait until they plunge this galaxy into further chaos? Because that's all their actions are doing. They're not like the Yuuzhan Vong, like the Ssi-ruuvi, Empire, or any other power this galaxy has faced. They *wanted* to stay behind the scenes and wreak havoc. I said it on Ossus, the Force was guiding their movements to maximize chaos and damage. If we simply wait for their next move while pondering the issue, more people are going to die."
"And if we go on the offensive, force the Killiks into a corner, what then?" Jacen pressed. "We have no idea what their forces are like, where they are, who they've enlisted to help them. The entire galaxy is in the dark about these Killik nests, have been for nearly half a decade, maybe even more. It was only when the Killiks began moving onto bigger events, like creating wars, that we actually caught on to their plans. They have those soldier bugs that Zekk showed us, the smaller

ones that attacked the Senate. Who's to say that that's all they have. Not to mention Raynar, Lomi, and Welk. We need a plan that doesn't involve an all out offensive on an enemy whose location, motives, and strength, we have no clue about."
"You felt it as clear as I did, Jace. Raynar's on Denon. Lomi, according to Zekk, is over on Hapes," Anakin argued back. "Do I really have to bring up the Yuuzhan Vong War and what happened to those who *waited*?"
Jacen glared, a hand balling into a fist. "This isn't the same. I couldn't care less about the dark side in this case! I simply don't want to make the situation any worse than it already is. These Killiks have a hive mind, and Lomi will no doubt feel it if anything happens to Raynar. You know how touched Lomi was, even before the Joining? Then what happens to Hapes? You felt Tenel Ka, she's under a lot of strain managing her own people and the Corellians as it is. She doesn't need another army trying to overthrow her to contend with at the same time."
"So what? You want to sacrifice the rest of the galaxy so Tenel Ka can deal with her civil war in peace?"
"What would you do if you were in my position, Anakin?" Jacen's voice a decibel below a shout, he advanced on his brother feeling a mix of despair and panic mingle with his anger. "You said it yourself, we have no idea what their Plan B is. We have a rough idea of Lomi's and Raynar's location, yes. But do you truly want to bet the wellbeing of Hapes on an all-out attack? My *daughter* is on Hapes! Are you going to bet *her* life that the Killiks in the Hapan Cluster will remain neutral if we start an offensive against their nests? Most beings don't kill without reason. We need to find that reason to *avoid* the war altogether."
"And do you want to gamble the stability of the Galactic Alliance on the chance that the Hapan Killiks won't attack anyway?" Anakin replied, his voice soft, eyes sympathetic. "Do you want to try and find reason to their madness when Raynar could be plotting further attacks on the heart of the government? If the Galactic Alliance senate and its leaders fall, what happens to the Galactic Alliance then? What happens to the galaxy and all the member states, *including* Hapes? This Killik crisis isn't going to just blow over or wait for us to make our next move. What are you going to do if we wait for Tenel Ka to finish her business and thousands die in the next Killik attack?"
"And here I thought you Jedi didn't deal in 'what ifs,'" the voice of Han Solo cut the argument short.
"Dad?" Anakin and Jacen said in unison. Both brothers turned towards their father in the doorway in surprise.

Han leveled an even stare at both his boys. "Jedi don't deal in 'what ifs' right?"
"But dad…"
"Hapes will…"
"Right?" Han stressed as if he himself was a Jedi trying to convince a strong-willed individual, in his case two, to agree with him. He entered the office, not breaking his stern expression.
Despite being in their mid to late twenties, Anakin and Jacen fell silent, nodding reluctantly.
"Good," Han spun the chair behind the office's desk around and sat in it reversed. "Now, tell me the facts you boys have learned from whatever mystical hat you've pulled them out of."
Almost disgruntled, both brothers shared what they had learned about the Killiks and the survival of Raynar. Han took the news in steadily, asking a few clarifying questions but otherwise accepting the veracity of their story.
"So to sum it up, if we let Raynar plan another attack, the entire galaxy might feel the fall of the Galactic Alliance."
"On the flip side, if we attack, Lomi's Killiks in the Hapes Cluster will attack and Tenel Ka's people will be overwhelmed. We might start a war no one wins."
"And you two geniuses can't come up with a plan to safeguard both?" Han said incredulously. "Here I thought the two of you were having an argument about something ridiculously impossible. From what I heard, it'll be quite easy to cover your bases, all of them."
"Dad?"
"What? You think you got all your brains from your mother? Most of them, probably, but there's a few bits of me in your genes too." Han wagged a finger at his sons. "There's one thing I tend to hate about politics, politicians in general. There's a whole lot of talking, but not enough doing. You hang around politicians too much and you start being just like them. Trust me, I would know. Jacen, maybe, just maybe, if your brother wasn't here, you would have to chose between your family and the galaxy. But Anakin *is* here, so there's no need to make that choice at all. Besides, the two of you have never really walked down the same path anyways. Anakin, just because you can come up with maniacal solutions on the fly doesn't mean that everyone will be so enthusiastic to embrace them. Let Jacen do his own thing, you do yours. Coordinate them, talk to each other instead of argue, so you won't get in each other's way. You don't have to make all the roads you travel down one-way either."
"But…"

"Uh uh uh," Han shook his head. "No 'buts.' Jacen, if you're that worried about the mother of your daughter, space your excuses and politics, and get over to Hapes and help her out. The galaxy won't mean a whole lot if you don't have someone to share it with you. Anakin, if you're so worried about this formerly-declared-deceased-Jedi's next move, slap together another taskforce and hunt her down. Both of you, you want to look for a reason why these Killiks are doing what they're doing? If I recall, the Jedi Order has several hundred people and support staff, why does it have to be one of you doing the research? You two don't have to try to solve a galaxy full of problems by yourselves. Right now the Jedi Order still has a lot of authority in this government. Use it to do what you usually do when saving the galaxy. Leave the political consequences to the people who actually enjoy dealing with them."

"I have a duty to the Senate," Jacen said weakly.

"And the last time you took a vacation was when?" Han countered smugly. "You cut your last trip to Hapes short and the government actually allows for new parents to take the entire year off to build their family. If you're worried about missing any important decisions being made, just look at the Senate Chamber. The Senate won't be meeting anytime soon. Even if it does, the Jedi Temple has more than enough replacements to do the job. All they have to do is press the 'yea' or 'nay' buttons on those fancy platforms of yours, right?"

Jacen tried to wet his dried mouth, not sure why he was trying to find an excuse *not* to help Tenel Ka. "The Jedi Order isn't allowed to interfere in the political affairs of the member states."

"They're not allowed to interfere if they're acting on behalf of the Galactic Alliance," Han replied evenly, showing his years of rubbing shoulders with politicians hadn't been all that bad. "It would have been different if the Senate or High Council ordered or wanted to use the Jedi to end the fighting. If the Jedi act unilaterally, the Senate can't do anything about it. The Order is every bit a member state as the Hapes or Corellia, and has a right to have their own foreign policies."

Jacen searched for something else, but was coming up blank as hope built up within him.

"Get going already," Han rolled his eyes. "That beautiful Queen Mother of yours needs you more than the Senate does. Will probably appreciate you more too."

Feeling an invisible weight lift off of his shoulders, Jacen just bowed his head and tried to center himself. It was almost as if he had been waiting for someone to excuse him, to tell him that the galaxy would keep spinning if he abandoned it for his own selfish reasons. Once he

managed to reorganize his thoughts and priorities, he nodded gratefully to his father, and took off.
In one way, now that the enemy actually had a name, they seemed much more terrifying than before. He could only hope that he was able to reach Hapes before that terrifying nightmare became a reality.
Tesar fell into step with him, silently communicating that Jacen had the strength of the Wild Knights with him. Lowbacca joined them a few rapid steps later, evidently given permission by Han to add his support as well. Jacen sent his thanks back in turn, his body filling with a renewed purpose that he shared through the bonds he had with his friends.
Had Jacen stayed in the office, he would have heard the conversation between his father and uncle.
"Were we ever that young?" Han muttered to Luke, shaking his head and rising from the chair after his youngest son left the room.
"One day, a long time ago, maybe," the Jedi Grandmaster smiled sadly. "I'm sorry, Han. None of your kids really had a chance to *be* kids. The only way they know this galaxy is by lightsaber and blaster."
"At least they've learned how to survive," Han replied solemnly. He offered Luke a bittersweet grimace. "And at least Leia and I still have all three of them, even if they are all grown up and spread out. In this galaxy, considering the frontlines they've seen, the odds of that happening…Well, I doubt even another Corellian would take those odds."
"I'll start getting the Jedi Order involved in researching these Killiks," Luke supplied. He ran a hand through his sandy hair, looking tired. "And then I'll talk with Kenth, I suppose."
"Stepping up again, huh?"
"Your kids brought me ten years worth of vacation time," Luke matched Han's weary expression. "Gave me time to enjoy the family I have with Mara. That's time I wouldn't have had had the Jedi Order continued to look at me as if I was some kind of messiah or all-knowing leader. At least, during the break, the Jedi Order learned to be self-sufficient."
"And if you and Leia are back in the game full throttle, I guess I'll go contact Lando and reactivate some of my contacts from my smuggling days. Hopefully they *all* haven't gone legitimate and might know where one can find a giant bug."
"Your children are amazing, Han. They continue to surprise me and surpass my expectations."
"Can't wait for yours to grow up too?" Han chuckled at the horror-struck look on Luke's face. "Thought so. Don't worry, Luke. There's no

way this galaxy can think of a situation for Ben and Janek that can top everything Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin have done."
"Are you sure about that?" Luke raised an eyebrow.
"Put it this way, if it does, I don't think the galaxy will even survive, so we have nothing to worry about," Han said drolly.
Luke shook his head in amusement. "Don't ever change, Han."
"We should probably get back to work," Han grumbled reluctantly. "I mean, we saved the galaxy from a great evil, then our kids went ahead and topped it. Now it's our turn. Can't let them show up us old folks, and the *Falcon* still has a few adventures in her yet."
"Saving the galaxy with the family again, huh?"
With a roguish grin Han smirked. "I'll be just like old times."
(-(-(End of Act 1)-)-)

Act 2

Jaina
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Jaina stared up at the night's sky of the Vagaari homeworld of Vagar Praxut, her head pillowed in her hands. It never ceased to surprise her, how different the sky would look. She had been on countless warships, visited moons, planets, and space stations galore. Had even performed a spacewalk and went to the very limit of her tether while communing with the stars. The galaxy was so big; it seemed ridiculous that she, Sword of the Jedi, could make any sort of impact on it. Yet, here she was, on an enemy-held planet of mind-controlling bugs, working with the sworn enemy of the Chiss Ascendancy in an effort to gather the forces needed to *save* the Chiss Ascendancy. Billions of lives once again depended on the decisions she and others would be making. Once again she would have to raise her blade and force peace to once again return to her corner of the galaxy. And watching it all from their immovable place in the heavens were the billions upon billions of stars glittering in the sky.
She was twenty-seven years old. Had spent over half of her life fighting, running, killing, all in the name of making the galaxy a better place. She was the Sword of the Jedi, so named by her uncle; meant to bring peace to others while rarely having peace herself. She had lost track of the number of people who had fallen to her blade or starfighter's lasers. Lost track of the number of times she had had comrades and friends die in the same conflicts in which she had survived. That 'one final battle' for everlasting peace always seemed to

be on the horizon. There always seemed to be that 'one more fight' needed to get there.
In a way, she was thankful for the relatively simple life she had. Enemy of the Peace would pop up and 'boom,' she'd be called in to deal with it. Just like a plumber would be called in to fix a leak, or an exterminator would be called in for a pest problem. And fortunately or not, the galaxy seemed to have a lot of leaky pipes and vermin infestations.
In another way, however, she could feel herself growing increasingly inoculated against the effects such bloody battles and fights generally left on most people. If she was being honest to herself, she often saw herself as a 'sword' and not a person when fighting. A weapon that fought on behalf of the Jedi Order, beating the creatures in the night that no one else wanted to face.
When the war ended seven years earlier, she had been forced to redefine herself. The galaxy didn't need the Sword of the Jedi, didn't need Yun-Harla the trickster goddess. But at the same time, she didn't quite know how to be 'Jaina Solo' any more either. Fighting away your teenage life would do that to anyone. So she had decided to rebuild Jaina Solo as an adventure-loving Jedi who had a ruggedly handsome boyfriend with pretty ships and starfighters *almost* as good as her X-wing.
But now, as she gazed up at the stars in reflection, the Sword of the Jedi was clearly being needed once more. There were creatures in the night that had apparently grown bold by the absence of said sword. At the same time, Jaina Solo didn't want to disappear. She didn't want to abandon the peaceful times, the stress-free times, she had enjoyed with her boyfriend. Yet, she had to. At the core of it, Jaina Solo was a Jedi, the Sword of the Jedi, and had to make the sacrifices needed so that many others would be able to enjoy that peace Jaina Solo found in those post-war years.
"Jedi Solo," the uniquely dual voice of Basic being spoken by two mouths stirred her from her thoughts.
"Future Grand Overseer Elansh," Jaina smiled at the young teen.
"The others are ready," the small Vagaari teen said. "We will fight and die to cleanse our ancestral home of the taint that is the Killiks."
Jaina pushed herself to her feet, the rocky soil shifting beneath her weight. The others Elansh referred to were six squads of Vagaari warriors who had hidden themselves in stasis chambers very much like the one that had been on Vagar Rabat. They had been part of lunar garrisons, ordered to go into stasis as the last of their fleets fell to the

Killik invaders, and they were ready for the time-honored tradition of revenge.
Not that there wasn't anything wrong with it. But the warrior ethos was what had gotten the Vagaari slaughtered the first time around, and Grand Overseer Intarsesh was doing his best to reign in the bred-to-conquer instincts of his warriors.
"Lead the way, Elansh," Jaina gestured back to the entrance of the cave everyone was hiding in.
Vagar Praxut had fallen, but most of the Killik forces were concentrated on the two largest continents, focused on mining and manufacturing. Smaller archipelagos like the ones the Chiss-Vagaari forces were currently on, had been largely ignored after the initial sweep. Their current base of operations was at the peak of a high mountain at the northern end of the chain of islands. The peak stretched out over a seemingly eternal cloud bank, giving anyone a dazzling view of the stars above and an ocean of gray below.
The mountain itself was religiously significant to the Vagaari. In ancient legends—or so Jaina had learned upon arriving—the mountain was said to be the remains of the 'First Ancestor,' the origin of all Vagaari. When Vagaari children reached a certain age, they were expected to take part in a rite-of-passage tradition where they were required to 'walk in the footsteps of the First.' Groups of these young teens were dropped off at the very peak of the mountain and were expected to make a thirty kilometer trek through the treacherous terrain and beast-filled jungles and waters of the archipelago, with nothing but the clothes on their back and each other.
The journey symbolized a mastery of the planet of their origins; that the youths had triumphed over the same challenges their ancestors had and could now join the adults in taming the stars. The real lesson, however, was to prove to the young Vagaari that only as a team would they be able to survive the dangers; that a Vagaari can only trust another Vagaari to protect their backs in times of need. The large graveyard at the base of the mountain was a testament to just how many Vagaari youth tested themselves and were found wanting.
Strangely enough, Jaina could sense that it was this religious significance of the region that actually kept the Killiks away. Enough Vagaari had been joined to the hive mind to affect the nest's decision-making processes, and the Killiks did not want to desecrate a site that was sacred to a large number of their Joiners. The site was especially important for the Vagaari who had been born and raised on Vagar Praxut, and they were the majority when it came to Vagaari Joiners.

Jaina descended the roughly hewn rocky stairs and into an open-air amphitheater that at one point had served generations of Vagaari teenagers. Now it was filled with Vagaari warriors and Chiss soldiers, with the present Grand Overseer Intarsesh, and ex-Assistant Syndic Jagged Fel, standing on the stage in front. Stone cauldrons of flaming oil illuminated the amphitheater, casting an array of dancing shadows throughout the mossy stone structure. She and Elansh took a seat on the upper register of stone benches, watching silently as the proceedings commenced.

"*Vaga'ari,"* Intarsesh intoned, his voice deep and full of authority. "I speak today in the language of the Chiss for today they are our allies. They are the instruments our ancestors granted us to purify this planet of the Killik threat. When the week begins in three days, as the sun rises, we will commence the first of a many-staged plan to reclaim this planet for all *Vaga'ari*. We will fight along the blue-skinned ones because it is what our ancestors demand. If it were not for the abilities of their Jedi Solo, the dark ones within the capital would already be aware of our presence. If it were not for the arrival of the Chiss and their ship, I would be dead, and you would all be sleeping and not ready for war! Our ancestors are watching over us here on this most sacred of our worlds. See that you do your family name proud, and if you die, die free and in glorious battle."

"*Pengawi Uzraugs,"* a Vagaari soldier spoke up. The colored sash he wore showed he was a warrior of considerable rank. "*Chiss narl brokash rald?"*

Intarsesh inclined his head in the direction of the speaker. "Dolish asks if the Chiss will remain our allies after we have reclaimed our planet. That is not for me to decide. Whether we then rally our fleet to *help* the Chiss in their war, or use our forces to destroy them while they are at their most vulnerable, is not a decision I will make. Vagaari minds have already gone up against the dark invaders and have lost, so upon our victory here I will be *Pengawi Uzraugs* no longer. The dark invaders defeated the leaders of our people,so by Vagaari tradition, we are no longer fit to lead the Empire. Minds not as old and set in their ways as mine are needed to bring our people into the future. Once the planet is retaken, I designate my daughter, Elansh of Elanash, the next *Pengawi Uzraugs,* the next Grand Overseer. In addition, I have spoken with the human commander of the Chiss forces, and he has agreed to take Ariarsh son of Duresh under his wing until such time Ariarsh is ready to take up the mantel of *Bietesh Uzraugs,* Supreme Commander of the Vagaari nomadic fleets. It is Ariarsh and Elansh, their bloodlines pure, who will decide the fate of our people should we survive the coming

battles. Not this old man stuck in his stagnated ways. Today and for the near future, the Chiss are our allies. Afterwards, it is for them and for us to decide."
Sensing Elansh's surprise, Jaina looked sympathetically to the Vagaari teen. "Didn't expect that?"
"No," Elansh's violet eyes were wide with a touch of panic. In a hushed whisper, she gripped one of Jaina's hands with her two stubby ones. "No. I cannot be the leader of our people! Not so soon! I am not ready! Ariarsh thought that we would have at least another five years to prepare, and that was when we had a full court to instruct us on the proper Vagaari way. I do not know what to do…My grandfather, the last *Miskara*, wanted to reshape the Vagaari into a true empire of bloodlines. How am I to continue his dream if I can't…If I don't know how…"
Jaina sent a stream of confidence and reassurance to the panicked younger girl. As different as their species were, and as far removed as Vagar Praxut was to the rest of the galaxy, Jaina could empathize with the young teen's position. Barely fifteen years of age and already being told that several dozen star systems would soon be her responsibility.
"Look," Jaina said in a soft voice. "I might not be a full court's worth of advisors, but I'm not entirely helpless in the political realm. When we get through this, I can stick around, offer a few pointers. I also have a sister-in-law who is queen of sixty-three star systems. Maybe I can put the two of you in touch too."
Intarsesh began to elaborate on the coming day's plan of attack, but both young women tuned him out. Elansh looked anxiously to Jaina. "You would do that for the *Vaga'ari*? Why?"
"It's what a Jedi is supposed to do," Jaina said tenderly. "Regardless of whether you and Ariarsh choose to continue the Vagaari practice of subjugating people and raiding territories not in Vagaari control, I'll still help you."
"Why would you strengthen a possible enemy, though?"
Jaina offered Elansh a half smile. "That's the thing, though. Instead of seeing everyone around me as enemies, instead of seeing my neighbors as out to get me, I see them as potential friends and allies. Where the Vagaari see someone weak as needing to be conquered, the Jedi would see that same weak person as needing protection. Then we could learn from that person, and they from us, and in the end, everyone would be stronger for it. Sure, the Vagaari might not change their ways, but I would rather be friends with the Vagaari than enemies. I hope you feel the same."

Elansh blinked owlishly, but nodded. "I…I do not wish to be enemies with the Jedi either." In a smaller voice, she added. "Nor with the Chiss. It is just…everything seems so much. It was only a short while ago that I was in my sleep-pod, knowing only that our fleets had been vanquished. Now…now I'm supposed to lead the survivors of my race? I do not want to give the war-chiefs of the *Vaga'ari* families any reason not to accept my authority, but at the same time the *Vaga'ari* will stagnate if I try to appease them. My father is warning these warriors as much, that if they stick to the old ways, the *Vaga'ari* would only fall again. Many will be upset he chose an outsider working for the Chiss as the instructor of Ariarsh."

"But right now, he's still the Grand Overseer so they won't say anything," Jaina chuckled softly. "You're not Grand Overseer yet, so use this time to start learning as much as you can. Ask your dad or me questions, watch how he leads his men even when they might not agree with his decisions. This planet isn't going to fall in a week, or maybe even a month. So watch and learn, that's all you can do at the moment."

The young Vagaari teen's head bobbed and she returned her attention to her father, now more than ever eager to soak up any words being uttered.

"The Jedi Solo will approach now and explain what will happen once we begin our attacks."

Jaina offered Elansh one last supportive squeeze of her shoulder, then walked down the aisle to the stage. By now, such briefings were old hat for her, and she met the expectant stares of each warrior with confidence and defiance. It didn't matter what race you were from, soldiers always preferred it when those planning the attack actually had experience in battle. "The hit-and-run attacks outlined by your *Pengawi Uzraugs* are not meant to create a lot of damage, or to cause mass casualties. They're designed to be loud, flashy, and disruptive. We want the attention of the dark Jedi on this planet solely on us so the Vagaari fleet can approach the planet undetected. By the time they arrive, the Killiks will not have any time to call *their* fleet for support. There is a great danger in our plan. Once we begin and attract their attention, it will become easier and easier for them to find our staging grounds and predict our next moves. I will do my best to keep them from finding you outright, but they *will* find us in a short amount of time once we begin our attacks. If you encounter any of the dark Jedi, do not stand your ground, run. I don't care how dishonorable it might be to show your back to your enemy, but you've all seen the reports.

TaatWelk cut down a hundred of your warriors without even breaking a sweat. To stand up against one of them is not only stupid, its suicide."
The colored-sash wearing warrior spoke up again in his native tongue, the Force allowing Jaina to understand him. "[And what will the Chiss be doing while we bleed for our planet?]"
"They'll be fighting alongside you," Jagged answered after Jaina's translation. "You heard your leader say that you would be split into five teams. Well, there happens to be ten Chiss on this planet, so there will be two Chiss per team. It is my hope that this is only the start of a strong working relationship between our peoples. The Chiss do not go back on their word once it is given. Since it is clear that there are greater threats then the ones posed by our peoples, I hope that your leaders will consider a ceasefire at the very least once we reclaim your territory."
The Vagaari looked dubious, and Baltke leaned forward and looked down the row of benches to glare at the warrior. "I don't like it any more than you. But if we don't do this, both our peoples are dead."
The distrust clearly went both ways, with the Chiss and Vagaari groups spending much of the rest of the briefing shooting disbelieving or hostile glances at the other.
"In closing," Jaina said. "Medical Chief Tib'alt'keti, have you and Agent Daer'ey'ath managed to come up with an antidote to the chemical affects of the Joining?"
Seeing that Baltke was more concerned about holding his staring contest with several of the Vagaari warriors, Reya answered the question. "Yes and no, Ambassador Solo. We've managed to isolate the primary components used to modify the brain chemistry. However, we believed we've created more of a 'vaccine' for these components, to be used on those not yet Joined, than a 'cure' for those already Joined. Baltke and myself have already injected ourselves with this 'vaccine,' and we have had no ill-effects. But the only way we'll know that it works for sure is if we are ever captured and subjected to the Joining."
"So those already Joined…?"
"We have…" Baltke cleared his throat. "Developed a nerve agent that targets the area of the brain affected by the Joining. In labs, the nerve agent essentially kills all the cells in the corpus callosum, turning the bug-transceiver off at its source. Unfortunately or not, to make the agent affective across multiple species, we had to make it particularly potent. If any *other* part of the brain has been affected, the nerve agent will destroy those portions as well. Also, though many species can survive without the interconnecting tissue that is the corpus callosum, some will not be able to and some will suffer severe health

problems for the rest of their lives. There is no doubt that some will definitely die from exposure. In particular, Agent Daer'ey'ath and I cannot guarantee the safety of anyone who has been Joined for longer than four years. I know the agent is not a miracle fix, but it was the best Daer'ey'ath and I managed to come up with given our time constraints, resources, and limited sample size."
"Chiss," one of the other Vagaari warriors scowled. "Most of this planet has been under Killik control for at least five years, even longer. The Ssi-ruuk slaves even longer than that. If we were to use your weapon, we'd be killing off the majority of the people on this planet."
"The way I see it, I figure death is better than being a slave to giant bugs. Isn't that why you're going to have your own people tear up this planet?" Baltke said carelessly. "Besides, it's your people's fault you've gotten us into this mess in the first place. Spend less time enslaving others and working on those muscles of yours and maybe this wouldn't have happened."
"Medical Chief!" Jagged barked in warning.
"Sir," Baltke tilted his head apologetically. "Before I was interrupted, I was going to conclude that we only have synthesized enough of the nerve agent to be effective in an enclosed space. And the enclosed space can't really be any bigger than a single floor of say, a medium-sized building. We simply don't have the material or tech needed on this planet to mass produce the agent to any useful level."
"Your efforts are appreciated nonetheless. I am sure we'll find some way to utilize what we do have in the most effective manner possible," Jaina said diplomatically.
"Like using it on the bug-leaders?" the Basic-speaking Vagaari asked.
"No," Jaina shook her head.
"[A warrior will not use cowardly gases and poisons on a worthy foe,]" another Vagaari warrior scolded before Jaina could explain otherwise.
"[We will face their leaders and they will fall before our swords or blasters. Meet them face-to-face so that we may see the light of life leave their eyes.]"
"Well, that's one way to put it," Jaina said, trying to keep the sarcasm from her voice. Once against she could see just why the Yuuzhan Vong had gotten along so well with the Vagaari. "But I was going to say that we need to take the two dark Jedi in alive if possible. If the Joining truly is responsible for the chaos occurring in this part of the galaxy, we need to figure out how to undo it, how to get the Killiks to withdraw. There's no guarantee that they won't leave or come in their fleets even with Maez and Welk dead, so we use Maez and Welk to get them to fall back."

"How?" This time it was Grand Overseer Intarsesh asking the question.
"We convince them that it is best for their insect nest to do so," Jaina shrugged. "I'm sure the Force will reveal the answer to me when the time comes. But I know that killing the two of them would be a mistake."
"So be it, then," Intarsesh clasped his hands together. "The Ancestors and the Jedi's Force will watch over us in the battle that is to come. So spend the next few days training with the Chiss assigned to your team. Learn how they fight and let them see how the *Vaga'ari* truly are. These next few days will determine if *Vaga'ari* and Chiss can truly work together, or if we will all be killed in glorious battle remembered only in the minds of our unconquestable foes."
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"This isn't going to work," Jagged said in a low voice. From atop one of ledges, he, Jaina, Intarsesh, and the two Vagaari teens watched the morning's 'team building' exercises. It had started out promising, but then degraded into an insult-strewn exercise of rehashing old grudges. Even now, the group could hear some of the shouts being thrown back and forth.
Feesa, normally level-headed, had been pushed over her limits by having to work with a species she had spent her entire life trying to eradicate. "Look! We don't *have* to help save your stunted hides! If it wasn't for the Assistant Syndic, every one of us Chiss wouldn't be here! Our own people are under attack this very moment and every day we waste trying to get you savages to shape up are days filled with our own people dying! So I don't get a space-rat's ass that that form isn't the 'proper' form of a warrior. We're trying to be stealthy, and declaring yourself to your enemy as soon as you see them isn't being stealthy!"
"This plan to run the moment we start our attack is an embarrassment, an affront to our ancestors and all those who passed into their embrace before us. You think you can just come here and dictate to us how we will wage war for *our* very home? If you want to leave so badly, than do so! If we *Vaga'ari* are so savage and the Chiss so superior, then go, save your own people! We don't want you here anymore than you want to be here! If it was not for the *Pengawi Uzraugs,* we would cut you down where you stand."
Back up at the vantage point, Intarsesh looked wryly at the two Jedi. "Still think an alliance between the Chiss and my people is possible?"
"Strangely enough, yes," Jaina smiled faintly, nodding at the Vagaari teens. "At least the two sides are talking with one and other. Are actually *trying* to find some common ground."

Intarsesh smirked at that with both mouths, shaking his head with bemusement. "It sounds as if they would sooner trust a rabid wolvkil to protect their backs than each other."
"I have a question, though," Jaina mentioned, glancing at the Grand Overseer.
"Yes?"
"Why are *you*, a leader 'stuck in the old ways' so willing to help us out? To believe that peace can be achieved?"
Intarsesh looked away, his purple eyes softening. "The *Miskara* who ascended to the seat of power after the Chiss Thrawn killed his predecessor, was said to have the ability to see the future. His line was said to be gifted by the ancestors. Stories proven true when his daughter, my mate, likewise developed said abilities. It was their dream to see a strong *Vaga'ari*, one united in purpose and with a place to call their own in the larger galaxy. It was why the *Miskara* began the ambitious plan of uniting all *Vaga'ari* leadership under one person, why he waged war on his own people to bring them under a single clan. Not all *Vaga'ari* agreed with him, though, and factions formed.
When the Far Outsiders arrived, the *Miskara* was deposed by Duresh's predecessor. It was why the *Vaga'ari* assisted the Far Outsiders in their attempt to destroy the Ascendancy. When the Far Outsiders were defeated, the *Miskara* once again ascended to power. He tried to rebuild what had been lost, but he was old and his heart was no longer into it. So many *Vaga'ari* had died in the war, so many clans fractured, decades of work undone in a matter of a few years.
When the Killiks arrived, he had been trying to broker a truce between several rival clans. Their leaders, and the *Miskara* were all killed that day, and the *Miskara* was never able to see his visions realized. You ask why I try so hard to believe in the optimism you have, and the answer is simple. The *Miskara* was like a father to myself, his daughter dear to me. Before I die, it is my hope to re-establish the seeds of a new *Vaga'ari* Empire. An Empire Elansh and Ariarsh can nurture and make the strongest *Vaga'ari* Empire there ever was. The alternative is to see the *Miskara* as a misguided old fool who dreamed of impossibilities and wasted his life chasing things that never could be.
My questions to you Jedi Solo, why are *you* so invested in this alliance between my people and the Chiss? You have already told me the practicalities of making our peoples stronger, but there is no personal stake in this for you. The Chiss aren't your people. The *Vaga'ari* aren't your people. Why do you leave your home, travel to the unknown reaches of space, and spend so much effort on a people you might not

ever see again? My daughter told me of your offer to advise her as she grows into her office, why would you do such a thing?"
Jaina smiled kindly, shaking her head slowly. "The Force, in all its complexities, often does things even I don't fully understand. As a Jedi, it's my job to see that the Force remains in balance. I personally want to see peace between the Chiss and Vagaari because I've seen enough war and death to last me several lifetimes. I *want* to see that new Vagaari Empire with Elansh and Ariarsh at the throne because every people deserves that chance to thrive, to make the very best out of what they earn. And I *want* the Chiss to see what the many youngVagaari saw during their rite of passage. That the galaxy is a very big place, and it is not only wiser, but safer, if there are others who are willing to extend their hands in friendship if you are willing to do the same. I *want* us to win back your planet, because the results are a heck of a lot better to look forward to than the alternative."
"Truly," Intarsesh acknowledged. During their exchange, the Chiss and Vagaari warriors appeared to make second and third efforts to integrate their wholly different cultures and combat styles. There were still insults being thrown about, but at least it was words and not blasters and spears. "But truthfully, do you think they will be ready in time? The fleets will embark on their journey through dark space starting tomorrow, and will arrive some time after that. The Killik forces are only a day's jump away. If we cannot spread the mass chaos needed to distract the dark ones, what is truly left of the *Vaga'ari* fleets will be destroyed."
Jaina worried her lower lip, shaking her head slowly. "I think only your ancestors and the Force will know for sure. I'm hoping that by the end of the day they'll see each other as soldiers first and different species second. We can't afford anything less."
"How long do you think it will take for Maez or Welk to track down our teams personally?" Jagged spoke up, changing the topic. "We've planned for a full month of hit-and-run attacks but…"
"We'll probably have less than that," Jaina replied. "I can shield us right now because we're on the opposite side of the planet. However, once we insert our teams and begin blowing things up, we'll attract their attention immediately. The only good thing is that I'll know if they're in the area or not."
"My people know their duty and the risks," Intarsesh said grimly. "*Vaga'ari* are always prepared to die for what they believe in."
"The Chiss take a different stance on that," Jagged commented non-judgmentally. "Dying for your cause is pointless because that means there's one less person fighting for your beliefs. What you really want

to do is either convert everyone else to your way of thinking or make the other side do the dying. We are already too few in number to begin with. We don't need martyrs."
"Does not their fear of dying then keep them from doing what has to be done? It was why the *Vaga'ari* affixed our prisoners and slaves to the hulls of our ships. Only an enemy truly committed to destroying us would prove a worthy foe, and the *Vaga'ari* in turn would do his or her best to destroy that enemy regardless of their level of commitment."
Below, another shouting match broke out.
"Aren't you going to do something?" Elansh asked the three older leaders.
"Should we?" Jaina gestured. "We can't *make* them get along, Elansh. If we try, they'll end up resenting us, and their minds will be clouded by their emotions. They'll be less of the warriors they could have been had we not intervened."
"[But the Grand Overseer is right. We need them to get along or we will not be able to win this war,]" Ariarsh said in his native tongue.
"Think of this as a battle," Jagged spoke up, Jaina being the translator both ways.
"[A battle?]"
"Yes," Jagged gestured to their soldiers. "Look at them long and hard. In a couple of days we will be ordering them into a series of fights they may well not survive. All of the soldiers are well-trained, know what is expected of them. They are not fools. The attack is in a few days, yet the soldiers are fighting a battle right now. A battle involving their hearts and minds. Remember this, future Supreme Commander Ariarsh. You can have the most elite fighting force in the galaxy, but they'll still lose to a lesser force if they do not believe in their cause; if in their minds what they are fighting for is wrong. More so if they do not believe in each other."
"[But the warriors fight for the home of the ancestors. The Chiss fight in the hopes that we will support them in their defense of *their* home. How can they not believe in their cause?]"
"They believe in it," Intarsesh answered. "They just don't believe those they fight with carry the same conviction. The Chiss fear treachery on the part of the *Vaga'ari*, they worry for those they have abandoned in their home systems. After all, once we reclaim Vagar Praxut, only words bind us to help the Chiss in turn. Our warriors, on the other hand, resent having outsiders come in and do what they could not. They do not want to reinforce the Chiss idea that the Chiss are superior to the *Vaga'ari*. They do not want to have the aid of the Chiss, reclaim the homeworld of the ancestors, and aid the Chiss in turn, only to have

things return to the way they were; with the Chiss hunting and murdering our people. It is through the actions of both our warriors and that of the Chiss that trust will be formed, even if there is very little of it to begin with."
"[Then we should be down there training with them,]" Ariarsh looked to Elansh. "[We are their future leaders. We must lead by example.]"
The two teens hurried down the steps to join the others.
"It is a sad day indeed when mere teenagers are forced to turn into symbols to end a war," Intarsesh sighed.
Jaina could only close her eyes, a ghost of pain flashing across her face. "Tell me about it."
Intarsesh studied Jaina for a moment. Below, both Ariarsh and Elansh were shouting at their own people for holding up training exercises. The two teens then went up to Feesa and one of Jagged's pilots and held out their hands in greeting. Intarsesh saw all this out of the corner of his eyes as he inclined his head slightly. "May Elansh and Ariarsh have a happier future than your own."
"Yes," Jaina whispered, watching the training sessions resume. She could see images of the two Vagaari children in the far future, surrounded by legions, being waited on by many. They were lonely, with only each other, but their people were flourishing. They were like her in many ways, she realized; sacrificing their own happiness for that of their people. It was a sobering and disheartening thought. Though it was but one possible fate out of an infinite number, it was both the best and worst one possible. In an even quieter voice, Jaina murmured. "And may the Force be with them for all time."
]-)-III-(-[
"Jag, I've been meaning to ask you about something," Jaina murmured. Both she and Jagged were resting against one and other in a shallow niche in the mountainside. The view before them, the vast jungle-filled archipelago and vast ocean, seemed all the more insidious in the moonless night.
"Yes?"
"How *did* the Vagaari and Chiss first meet?" Jaina asked, tilting her head back slightly to look up at her boyfriend. "I remember looking up the official Chiss records before heading out here, but they didn't say much. The records only really started taking notice of the Vagaari seventy-plus years ago, when the Vagaari started raiding Chiss territory. The only mention of the first contact was that it occurred several millennia ago and that shots were fired."

Jagged grimaced slightly. "The details have always been somewhat… debatable. Given that the event happened so long ago, it's doubtful we'll ever know what truly transpired."
"What happened?"
"I only know what my father told Chak, Davin, and myself when we began working with the Empire of the Hand. Even then, I suspect much of it was his own deduction. Though I was the Assistant Syndic in charge of the CEDF, even I was not given any additional information about the encounter."
"So what was the Baron's version then?"
"As you know, the Ascendancy prefers to remain isolationists than get involved in galactic politics. This has been their modus operandi for over four thousand years. Yet, they were, and are, constantly on the search for new planets to colonize and vigilant for any new threats. From what my father and I could gather, a Colonial Phalanx scouting expedition ran into both. Back then, the Vagaari were not nearly as organized or as powerful as they are…were…in today's times. At the time the Ascendancy was likewise in its infancy, the CEDF just a proposal by a Syndic trying to overcome family squabbling. I believe that the Colonial Phalanx may have encountered a right-wing or criminal faction of Vagaari, and inadvertently gave that faction legitimacy by engaging them. Either the Vagaari were already on the planet the expedition was trying to settle, or the Vagaari attacked the outpost the Chiss had established. Either way, the Ascendancy responded with full military force. The attack appeared to be the catalyst needed. The next encounter with the Vagaari was an all out raid on the Chiss world of Celwis a couple of centuries later. Records of that attack indicate that the Vagaari were definitely organized and had a clear command structure. They must have unified sometime in the interim."
"A kind of 'there are monsters out there we need to unite'?" Jaina summed up.
"Most likely," Jagged said. "But as I said, most of this is conjuncture. The official report of the first contact, however lacking in details, is the only record we have. The fact that it occurred over four thousand years ago also means that the Ruling Families would not be the same as they were today. At least, that's what I am led to believe."
"Do you think any of the Chiss or Vagaari will know more?"
"Possibly. Chiss and Vagaari have developed side-by-side and have clashed frequently. Our reports say that Vagaari oral tradition is surprisingly accurate when matched up to events in our data-files. Even events that occurred millennia ago."

Jaina nodded tiredly. "Thanks. I'm just trying to understand why the two sides seem to hate each other so much. It has to be more than grudges spawned from back and forth retaliatory attacks and ideological boasting. The Vagaari see the Chiss as butchers, the Chiss see the Vagaari as savages. Both will soon be working together to save the homeworld of the other and I really want to understand *why* they feel the way they do. Force, listen to me, I'm starting to sound like my brothers."
"If it will help, I will go talk with the Chiss," Jagged offered, reluctantly moving to stand. "The Vagaari children seem to trust you, so perhaps you can get a clearer picture of what happened from them."
"Meet back here in a little bit?" Jaina offered a wan smile.
Jagged gave her a brief kiss and a single nod in response.
With her side now rapidly cooling from the absence of her boyfriend, Jaina stood and used the Force to help her drop down a handful of meters to one of the lower levels. There, training with ceremonial swords despite the late hour, both Elansh and Ariarsh jerked in surprise.
"Where did you come from?" Elansh gasped, a hand reflexively going over her heart.
"Up there," Jaina gestured to the ledge. "Jag and I were talking about the Chiss and Vagaari, about why your people hate each other so much. Do you mind if I ask the two of you a question?"
Ariarsh and Elansh shook their heads.
"Great, do either of you know how your peoples met? I know it happened a long time a…"
"[We know the tale,]" Ariarsh said, his two mouths voicing both displeasure and hatred.
"All *Vaga'ari* children are taught the tale," Elansh reinforced. "Are taught that the Chiss are what will kill you if you are weak, if you fail to make the stars yours. Bad children are told that the Chiss will come for them in the night should they displease the ancestors."
The three made their way over to a stone bench.
"Think you can tell me the story?"
"[I can,]" Ariarsh said. "[It is called the Tale of Three, and I shall tell you it as I have been told. The loremasters say that this story takes place when the *Vaga'ari*'s first steps into the stars were timid and fearful. There were many *Miskara* then, each competing with the other to be the first to reach the moon, the planets Vagar Rabat, Vagar Taleth, and Vagar Sinash. Those who laid claim to a planet, and all the resources and life on it, were able to stay in power. Those that were beaten to their goals were overthrown by their own tribes. When the local system

was fully conquered, the remaining five *Miskara* ordered the *Vaga'ari* onward into the nearby systems. Many ships and lives were lost in transit, as our navigation technology was not yet advanced enough to adjust to the ever-changing hyperspace lines. But the *Vaga'ari* claimed nearly thirty systems, and had subjugated four other species within a century. At the end of two centuries, there were three dominant *Miskara* controlling all that is Vaga'ari. But the alliance between the three *Miskaras* became tenuous as the resources became more in favor of one of them. A war between *Vaga'ari* broke out, the two weaker *Miskaras* allied to wage war on the third. It was this third *Miskara's* ship that the Chiss encountered.]"

"So this third *Miskara* still had influences among the population?"

"[The war had only been in progress for a month,]" Ariarsh confirmed with a nod. "[And though his forces were being pushed back, it is said his position was stronger than ever. He still had control over Vagar Praxut, and had already wounded one of the other *Miskara* in a duel.]"

"Alright, go on."

"[The loremasters say that when the third *Miskara* encountered the Chiss, he assumed them to be a race newly conquered by one of his rivals. After all, until that point in time, none of the other races the *Vaga'ari* encountered had been equal militarily. The Chiss had arrived in orbit around the planet on which he had been regrouping after a costly campaign. Panicked that he had been discovered so quickly, the third *Miskara* immediately opened fire when he saw a troopship head to the planet's surface. Normally, the Chiss shield technology would have been superior to his weapons, but the troopship had been unshielded. The ship in orbit survived unscathed, but the troopship was destroyed in an instant. The ship in orbit withdrew, and the third *Miskara*, believing himself to be the victor, pulled his forces out of the system. He had no idea that one of his rivals had become aware of his movements and jumped into the system shortly after he had left it. When the Chiss had returned, their forces destroyed the *Vaga'ari* fleet that had just arrived, killing the rival *Miskara*.]"

"That still doesn't explain how your people developed the belief that the Chiss were some sort of monster in the dark."

"The Chiss didn't stop with that system," Elansh elaborated. "The *Vaga'ari* lost two-thirds of their territory in the ensuing fighting. Our culture meant that with every system that fell to the Chiss, there were more *Vaga'ari* that wanted to fight the Chiss. In the end, the third *Miskara* was the only one of the three to survive. It was only after he bent down on his knees before the Chiss commander that the Chiss withdrew from *Vaga'ari* space. The *Vaga'ari* then entered a dark age,

our technological capabilities smashed. Whole families stranded on the many planets we colonized, hundreds of thousands of *Vaga'ari* dead. Depending on the loremaster, the *Vaga'ari* lost anywhere from a fifth to a fourth of our entire population. Many of our scientists were killed in the fighting, so the secrets of spaceflight were lost for centuries. Even the surviving *Miskara* was eventually killed by his own warlords. So you see, the Chiss proved everything the early *Vaga'ari* believed in; that in the stars, much like this planet, it's a conquer-or-be-conquered reality. When the *Vaga'ari* defended our space by firing on Chiss colonies established within it, the Chiss raze Vagar Praxut, and we are once again reminded of the dangers of the greater galaxy."

"Thank you, both of you, for telling me," Jaina said gently. "I definitely can understand the Vagaari side a lot more from what you have told me. Is this Tale of Three common knowledge?"

"Told during the rite of passage initiation," Elansh said with a nod. "To call ourselves true masters of the galaxy, we must first learn how to master the Chiss that have brought so much suffering to our people."

"And the solution all this time has been to fight the Chiss?"

"We know of no other way," Elansh said sadly. "I talked with that Chiss, Feesa. She said that until fifteen years ago, the Chiss did not even consider us sentient enough to be labeled as 'official' enemies of the Ascendancy. How were we supposed to negotiate if they see us as little more than animals?"

Ariarsh spoke up hesitantly. "[There is talk about…well, retaking the planet by ourselves. The only person we really need alive is you, to block out the dark Jedi. We can't trust the Chiss, even if we see the sense in doing so. It's in *Vaga'ari* best interest to see the Chiss are weak, incapable of stemming our growth and development. We fight side by side only because of a common enemy, but when the enemy is defeated, what then? Can you guarantee the Chiss leaders will cease their attacks on *Vaga'ari* space? Can you promise the Chiss will leave the *Vaga'ari* and our cultural practices alone? If Elansh and I are going to be the next leaders of our people, we have to think about *their* wellbeing first, before we even consider helping a race that have killed *Vaga'ari* at every chance they got.]"

"I know, I know," Jaina relented. "And no, I can't promise anything. The best I can do is talk with the Chiss leadership once we return to Ascendancy space. Hopefully the actions of the ten Chiss on this planet will help their people earn enough good-will to warrant the aid of the Vagaari. And hopefully, the aid the Vagaari will provide will be the start of a new relationship between your two peoples."

"[The *Vaga'ari* have been defeated and risen from the ashes better than before. Can the same be said of the Chiss?]"
"I guess we'll find out," Jaina answered, gazing off into the direction of her boyfriend. A quick check with the Force let her know that Jagged was still in conversation with several Chiss. From the feel of their life-forces, and the emotions being emitted, the topic of the conversation was not a pleasant one. "Sorry for interrupting your training. I'm going to go see what the Chiss have to say. There *has* to be some way your two sides can see eye-to-eye. Otherwise all this training isn't going to do us a whole lot of good."
"[Then I wish you luck,]" Ariarsh intoned. "[I would much rather have a people to rule and not be engaged in pointless fighting than otherwise. But the Chiss have long proven…inflexible, when it comes to my people. Despite our successes in the training exercises, I am not expecting for much.]"
Jaina offered the two Vagaari teens a half-hearted smile and sad nod of acknowledgment. She then bounded up the boulders and ledges of the mountainside to the Chiss-portion of the base-camp. She arrived to find them all huddled around a fire, raised voices indicating a rare division of the unified front the Chiss had shown to the Vagaari.
"You're kidding," Baltke's voice was full of anger and hostile. "Are you saying that the Chaff family is partly responsible for everything that's happened? My entire family was killed by the Vagaari! I saw my wife strapped to the outside of one of their ships just before my commanding officer destroyed it!"
"At the time, we weren't even called the 'Chaff family', but were subordinate to the Ruling Miurani," Feesa said calmly. "We were not the ones making policy, only carrying it out. And even then, it's been four thousand years since, all the primary actors have long since passed on. My ancestors were merely following the orders of one of the most powerful and influential Chiss families of the time, founders of the Ascendancy. Much like your own follows the Sabosen today."
"Ambassador Solo, nice of you to join us," one of Jagged's fellow pilots, Jocell said, to interrupt the conversation.
Jaina returned the salute and took a seat by the fire. Pretending as if she hadn't heard Baltke's outburst, she glanced to the stern-faced Chiss with a disarming tilt of her head. "So, what did I miss?"
"We were…discussing, the topic of first-contact between the Ascendancy and the Vagaari," Reya began tentatively. "Most of us only know the basic story, but Major Chaf'ees'aklaio made it known that her expertise on the Vagaari is more than just a professional one."

Feesa simply lifted an eyebrow, but elaborated on the intelligence agent's introduction. "The Chaf family was part of the Colonial Phalanx recon unit that encountered the Vagaari four thousand years ago. Our own records are hardly more detailed than the official accounts, and much was lost when the Nuruodo family razed our planet, but the stories told to me as a child were what sparked my interest in the Vagaari in the first place."
"So, what happened?" Jaina pressed. "The Vagaari say that they mistook the Chiss scouting unit as a rival Vagaari faction, and that the reinforcements actually stumbled upon a Vagaari civil war and mistook the Vagaari as a united race."
"Really?" Feesa's voice expressed genuine surprise. "Our own records showed that the Chiss commander encountered the Vagaari after intercepting a distress call from one of their leaders. He arrived in orbit to see two factions of Vagaari engaged in space and ground combat. After that, all the Chaf family knows is that the commander made an alliance with one of the Vagaari leaders. In exchange for elimination of his rivals, the Vagaari would give the Ascendancy planets and resources. The Chiss commander accepted, preferring to have a weak Vagaari at the doorstep of the Ascendancy to a strong one, as well as being able to present to the Ascendancy all that the Vagaari offered."
"It sounds like a good deal. But why did Miurani lose power afterwards?"
"Miurani was in charge of the Colonial Phalanx at the time," Feesa explained. "But they did not have the power to unilaterally involve the Ascendancy in another race's affairs. The other families did not appreciate the Miurani taking control of Ascendancy foreign policy as well and censured them in a public hearing. Despite the downfall in status, the rest of the Ascendancy soon adopted the Miurani stance towards the Vagaari; a weak Vagaari meant a safe border. The encounter and ensuing aftermath was why Jer'Jo Cam'Co was able to found the CEDF after several years of futility."
"Just great," Jaina rubbed at her face tiredly. "Do any of you think that the Ascendancy will ever be open to making an actual alliance with the Vagaari?"
Heads were shaken all around.
"Even if the Vagaari help beat back the Imperials?"
"Especially then," Rotog said. "Because it would mean that the Vagaari were stronger militarily than we had thought. The Ascendancy will not like negotiating from a position of weakness."
"What about you all?" Jaina eyed the Chiss present. "Would you be open to a treaty?"

The heads shook again, but more reluctantly this time.
"Oh for Force sakes!" Jaina pinched the bridge of her nose. "Are you telling me that you'd rather the Ascendancy be a part of the Empire than ask the Vagaari for their help?"
"You have to look at it from our point of view, Ambassador," Feesa said. "The Vagaari have killed many Chiss and…"
"The Chiss have massacred Vagaari," Jaina cut her off. "You keep killing each other off, weakening each other, and beings like the Killiks and the Empire are going to move right in. Neither race gains anything from killing each other, from holding grudges or pretending to be superior to the other. At the end of the day, all you'll become is a target with no friends and a heck of a lot of enemies. I know you're all here because Jagged ordered you to help out the Vagaari. Jagged, I'm going to ask you to rescind that order. If they think the Ascendancy will be better off without anyone else, let them go back. They're smart enough to understand the ramifications of their actions, and that of the Ascendancy."
Jagged raised an eyebrow, but inclined his head. "The order has been rescinded. Anyone who does not wish to stay and help the Vagaari reclaim Vagar Praxut, may depart now. You can take the *Placeholder* back to Chiss space and join in their war against the Imperials."
At that, the Chiss all seemed to freeze. There was their duty as a Chiss, and then there was their *duty* as a rational being. Jagged's pilots all hid their smiles behind the wooden cups they were drinking from, obviously used to their commanding officer's very un-Chiss-like way of motivating stubborn Chiss. Those who had only joined up and served under Jagged for the duration of the mission all looked completely lost. Seconds ticked by in silence, and no one made any effort to rise.
"Good," Jaina said curtly. "Then can I also assume we can count on your support when it comes to a treaty with the Vagaari. We'll need you to convince the Ruling Houses you serve that it is in the best interest of the Ascendancy to have strong allies and not enemies in the Unknown Regions."
The Chiss all nodded, most extremely reluctantly.
"What of the Vagaari?" Baltke said sourly.
"They're about as open to the idea as you are," Jaina said. "Somewhere along the line though, you're going to have to start trusting each other. You help them take back this planet, you'll go a long way in showing them the true value of Chiss honor."
"If you really think a treaty is possible," Feesa sighed. "I'll do my best to convince my uncle our ancestors got it wrong."

"The rest of you, try to be less antagonistic with the Vagaari for tomorrow's training sessions," Jaina half ordered, half recommended. "This isn't the Ascendancy, we're just guests here. If it helps, think of yourselves as the first Ascendancy ambassadors to the Vagaari Empire. The first Chiss to ever fight side by side with Vagaari. Impressions are everything, right? So treat this as you would any highly political function."
"We'll try," Reya said tiredly. "We really will, Ambassador, Assistant Syndic. But you can't just forget about millennia of hostilities over night."
"It's a good thing we have a few more nights to train then," Jagged concluded, clapping his hands together. "All of you turn in early. We'll restart the training and coordinating at first light tomorrow and we'll keep to the schedule until it is time to launch our attacks."
]-)-IV-(-[
The Chiss members on the team were more than a little wary at having to work with their long-time foes. Even more so now that the Vagaari soldiers, Elansh and Ariarsh included, were dressed up in the traditional garb of a Vagaari warrior. Each Vagaari had across their shoulders a wolvkil, bluish gold stasis collars keeping the clawed beasts in stasis until need. The Vagaari were also dressed in outfits made of different skin, bone, and plant material, a special dye allowed them to blend in to most any surrounding they were in. Countering their camouflage, however, were the large bone and wood masks they wore. Painted bone-white, the masks were twice as tall as their actual heads, with tear-drop eyes and a slatted mouth giving the mask a haunting, skull-like appearance. Combined with the camouflage, it almost looked as if ghostly heads were floating about in the air.
On the other hand, the Chiss members were all wearing standard-issue, blast-absorbent body-armor, complete with ballistic helmets and crush-gauntlets. Seated as they were, with the dull gray matte of their armor almost black in the moonless night, they were a picture of precision, with their blasters polished and oiled and their bearing stiff. The uniformed, disciplined nature of their posture and outfits contrasted sharply with their Vagaari counterparts and their individually made armor and weapons.
The air was still as the team sat atop a trio of whale-like creatures that coasted them through the waters separating the archipelago and the mainlands. Heavy cloud-cover blocked out any sight of the stars, a thick fog keeping their vision limited to only a few feet in front of them. All the while a dim yellow ball of light flitted in front of their transports, the 'lure' of sorts used by the whale-like creatures to draw prey in.

The tension in the air was almost as thick as the humidity. They were seated several meters above the water, but the air was so humid it was almost as if they were swimming. It certainly didn't help the Chiss any that their armor wasn't as ventilated as their counterparts'. But no complaints were uttered as the nearly seven dozen combatants caught sight of the shoreline in the distance.

Giant columns of smoke rose up from the mainland, twisting and spiraling in great, thick pillars in rows that seem to stretch on forever. There were so many pillars that it was as if the entire mainland had become a palace made of clouds and smoke. Parts of the cloud ceiling was lit up in hues of red and yellow from roaring fires used to smelt ore and create all manner of machines. Even if the shore was only on the horizon, the smell of sulfur, of burning wood and metal, soon became apparent to all. It was a noxious mixture that stung at their eyes and made them scrunch their noses, and after a while, they were all forced to don their rebreathers.

"The ancestors must be furious," Elansh murmured. "To see the lands used up in such a fashion. We *Vaga'ari* were always taught to honor the lands the ancestors granted to us. To keep the ground fertile and to prevent the mines from going fallow. Even the people of conquered planets were to be made use of and not discarded or used up."

"Especially this planet," Intarsesh agreed softly, placing a comforting hand on his daughter's shoulder. And then to Jaina. "There is a reason why Vagar Praxut has never had a military garrison or been developed like many of our other worlds. If our ancestors could reach the stars without destroying the planet of our origins, then we should be able to as well. To see these Killiks eating up our planet so carelessly, it is almost painful."

"The enemy territory must cover all of the main continent," Feesa said as an aside to Reya. "But to have so many forges and factories….their workforce cannot be in good condition."

"Part of being a Joiner is that your own well-being comes second to your nest," Reya replied. "I doubt their workforce could care less about their life-expectancy so long as their nest thrives."

"In any case, Vagar Praxut won't recover from this sort of ecological damage for a long time," Jaina said in response to both Reya and Intarsesh "We might even need to bring a couple of our Yuuzhan Vong shapers over when this is done. They and Lando have become pretty good at creating terraforming ventures."

"We are approaching the first drop-point," announced Jagged. He, Jaina, Intarsesh, Ariarsh, and Elansh all stood on the back of their transport and saluted in respect to one of the other transports

traveling alongside theirs. The two squads of Vagaari warriors, Rotog, and CEDF marine Khana returned the gesture, before their transport veered away towards a small inlet.
After the talking to given by Jaina several days earlier, both sides had eased up on their antagonistic ways, at least overtly. There was still some grumblings and evil-eyes being shared, but for the most part, the two sides were genuinely trying to get along. They had prepared all they could, however, and now it was up to the Force, the ancestors, or whatever divine being they believed in.
And now, as they departed to their designated targets, one thing was certain; the battle to retake Vagar Praxut was about to begin.
]-)-Chapter End-(-[

Turi
]-)-I-(-[
"Tell the *Denier* and *Relentless* to swing about and get behind that Chiss Star Destroyer off our port!" Turi heard Moff Evelyn Tanal direct, even as their own ship was rocketed with incessant maser fire. "Have the *Paladin* and *Incisor* engage those frigates! If we can break their line, we've got this won."
"Ma'am, we're losing aft deflectors to enemy fightercraft!"
"Our own fighter cover?"
"Out of the fight."
"What? How? We had two squadrons of Starhunters and three squadrons of Interceptors back there!"
"A Chiss frigate detonated their drive core in the middle of everything, took out most of our fighters!"
"Blast it! Send a general order to fallback. We'll regroup back in the Noris system and reevaluate our options."
"Ma'am! The Chiss brought in two interdictors!" A young sensor operator called out in panic. "They're out of range of our guns off the port side!"
The Moff raised an eyebrow. "Must have a new commander then. Let's give him an Imperial welcome. Call in Captain Savin. Have them use the interdictors' own fields to drop in right behind them."
Flanked by Imperial Jedi Antalia and Sivan Draco, Turi watched impassively as the engagement intensified. She had to give the Chiss credit. After the first few resounding Imperial victories, due mostly to the new 'wolf-pack' tactics heralded by Moff Tanal, the Chiss had adapted pretty quickly. After taking five systems in two weeks, the Imperial push forward had stalled at Ornfra.

"Reach out with the Force," Turi murmured in a low voice, tuning out the bridge chatter and orders being barked behind her. "Sense the minds of our pilots, of the pilots of the Ascendancy. Feel the coldness of space, the warmth of the ion engines. In a battlefield like this, use the Force to understand the chaos and know where the next pieces will move."

A second group of Imperial vessels dropped out of hyperspace off to the side of the Chiss interdictors. The moment the Imperial fleet began unleashing their fighters, however, it was evident that the Chiss had baited them. Cloaked mines suddenly uncloaked all around the newly arrived fleet group and began to light up the void of space with dazzling blazes of blue and white. One of the newer *Turbulent*-class Star Destroyers was blown in two by a barrage of mines hitting its mid-section. More fighters were torn apart by the squadron of Clawcraft, decimating the newly arrived force.

Not that the Imperials were entirely helpless. Even being ravaged by the minefield, the Imperial vessels and fighters unleashed everything they had. Chiss frigates, fighters, and even a Star Destroyer were wiped out by the barrage. Fleet Group One added to the onslaught, managing to destroy one of the interdictors at the same time. It was a brutal space battle, with losses mounting on both sides.

After several minutes of intense fighting, a brief lull quickly developed as both sides pulled back to reform their lines. "Ma'am, receiving a transmission from the Chiss flagship flagged *Eternal Dynast*."

Moff Tanal nodded imperially. "Let's hear it."

"*Imperial forces, I am acting Assistant Syndic Hess'irolia'nuruodo."*

"Assistant Syndic, this is Moff Evelyn Tanal. Can I assume you're foolishly not about to surrender? The Empire can take far more losses than your Ascendancy can. And with Galactic Alliance materiel support, we can outlast your forces as well."

"*The Ascendancy hasn't fallen for over four millennia. It will survive. The same cannot be said for your Empire. I am calling to offer a chance for <u>you</u> to surrender. Your forces are out of position, your flagship damaged. You'll lose many men and machines trying to pull out. If you surrender personally, I'll let your people retreat to the nearest Imperial system."*

Moff Tanal's expression darkened. "You have a lot of gall, Assistant Syndic. The Empire will never surrender to near-humans like yourself." She made a gesture, and the communication's link was broken. "Continue a fighting retreat. Let's bloody the Chiss as much as we can."

All at once, the fighting resumed. An Imperial Star Destroyer flanking their ship lost its bridge to a concentrated missile barrage. An older *Lancer*-class frigate was overwhelmed by two Chiss frigates and burst apart at the seams. Chiss Clawcraft raced in to pick apart several corvettes and escort vessels.

On the opposite side, Imperial torpedoes downed another Chiss Star Destroyer. Three Imperial Star Destroyers teamed up and began to plow the field of stars before them, annihilating several Clawcraft squadrons and another frigate. Green, yellow, and blue were exchanged across the battlefield, interspersed with orange-red flashes and blazing white detonations.

Another large explosion shook their ship.

"Hull breaches on decks three through ten!"

"Hangar bay was hit by a suicide fighter!"

"Time till hyperspace?"

"We'll be clear of the Interdictor's gravity shadow in five minutes!"

Standing at the bridge window, the three Force-sensitives continued to watch the battle with emotionless expressions. They were viewing it as no one else could, *feeling* every death, no matter how small and insignificant, each time a fighter or cruiser erupted into flames.

"The Chiss line is weakening on the right-wing. A concentrated push would cause it to fold in on itself," Antalia observed softly. Glimmering sky-blue eyes darted to the Imperial lines. "But we're not in a position to take advantage of that."

"Not since our fighter screen was sacrificed to pull back the larger ships," Sivan agreed.

His sister glanced to their instructor. "Colonel Altamik, how long do you think the Chiss can hold the system?"

"Considering that this is Moff Tanal's third attempt to gain a foothold, probably for a little while," Turi answered. "If the Chiss had kept the previous commander, she might have pushed through here. But Hess'iorlia'nuruodo was trained by Jagged Fel and Jaina Solo. She'll hold until the Ascendancy can regroup."

"With the Way of Schesa being the only viable hyperspace route into Ascendancy space from the Empire, the Chiss can bottleneck the advances here," Sivan noted.

"Not if Admiral Pryl's forces join in for the next attack," Antalia disagreed. "The Moff is right in that we can literally outlast the Chiss in terms of the number of people and ships we can bring into the field. If we keep pushing, the Chiss will eventually have to yield Ornfra or suffer too many losses."

As the Imperial forces finally cleared away from the Chiss, leaving a trail of wrecked ships and bodies in their wake, Turi finally turned away from the window. "Tell the others that we'll have a training session once we get back to Noris. With the way things are going, I have a feeling we'll be asked to join in the fighting soon."
"Understood, ma'am." The Draco siblings saluted sharply and strode from the bridge.
With the two of them gone, Moff Tanal approached Turi.
"Good feelings, Jedi Altamik. It looks like we'll be needing your Jedi after all. Think they're up for the challenge?"
"Since the sledgehammer didn't work, you're going scalpel?" Turi said conversationally, not turning to face the Moff.
"If we assassinate that Assistant Syndic or the officer corps, it will make an incursion into the system a lot easier."
"Jedi don't do assassinations," Turi said laconically. "Even the Imperial ones."
"And the alternative is another naval battle that will cost the lives of thousands of loyal Imperial soldiers?"
"The alternative is calling off the war," Turi shot back. "The Empire's proven their point. They captured a bunch of systems from the Chiss and showed that they're still a military power to contend with."
"So no assassinations then," Moff Tanal said casually, ignoring Turi's statement. "Tel me, Jedi Altamik. Just what do you suppose we use the Imperial Jedi for if not to advance the goals of an Empire?"
"You've read the brief about the ability called Battle-Meditation, correct?"
"Yes?"
"Next time we attempt to take Ornfra, the Imperial Jedi will be the ones coordinating the attack," Turi said, her tone implying that that was the *only* thing the Imperial Jedi would do. "The Draco siblings are the only Imperial Jedi with the fleet so they'd be best used in that strategic role in any case. The Chiss are already at a disadvantage. With the Force guiding the Empire's fleets, it will be the final nail in their coffin. All the tactics in the galaxy won't work if your soldiers have zero morale and feel as if they're doomed."
"Then I look forward to seeing your…apprentices in action."
This time Turi did smile. "I do too."
]-)-II-(-[
The planet of Noris was once a gleaming jewel ruled by a prominent Chiss family. The years, however, had been far from kind to her. Even before the Yuuzhan Vong had arrived and bombarded the planet from orbit, the Chiss family in charge had been one of the many casualties

during the first Killik crisis. What had been left of the Chiss family, tired of all the warring and death, had surrendered almost immediately when the Imperials had showed up in force. It was only because of that that their homes and other facilities were still relatively intact.
Any question about the Empire's motives for the war was brushed aside when the Moff Tanal and the other Imperials subsequently declared Noris sovereign Imperial territory, its citizens now subject to Imperial law.
This wasn't just a war to 'protect' Imperial interests, but to expand Imperial territory and gain resources.
Though a low-level Chiss insurrectionist movement operated in remote locations in the system—a few moons and some valleys and groves planetside—the majority of the population of the Noris system had accepted Imperial rule. Even the local House Phalanx had become integrated into the Imperial 'invasion' of the Ascendancy, being used to guard supply-lines and medical transports.
Turi, standing in the center of the ground-transport as they were bused to the Imperial Military Command Center—also known as Chiss Signata family's mansion and place of residence—evaluated the young teens in the transport with her. For the most part, she was separated in age to her charges by barely a decade. Though they were all orphans and had seen things in the war no young child should see, they all maintained an air of innocence behind their Imperial-hardened faces.
"Colonel Altamik."
"Go ahead corporal," Turi inclined her head towards one of the Void Trooper trainees in Unit One, dubbed Skull Squadron since the start of the campaign.
"I can understand what Antalia and Sivan are going to be doing, but what should we do in the interim?"
"You'll be in Starhunters, divided into four flights of three. Each of your sections will then be leading a squadron of Imperial fighters into battle," Turi answered professionally. "You may not have Force-reflexes, but Antalia and Sivan know how your minds work so they'll be able to direct you easier. When you're in your pilot's seat, just remember to listen to that little voice in your head."
"Understood, ma'am."
"While I work with Antalia and Sivan, I want the twelve of you to be spending your time in the simulators. We'll hold a joint training lesson tomorrow, so make sure your piloting skills are up to par."
The dozen Void Troopers all nodded in affirmative.
"Ma'am," a female Void Trooper spoke up, voice distorted by her black stormtrooper helmet.

"Yes?"
"Will the standard Imperial pilots even listen to us? Most of us aren't even sixteen yet, I'm only fourteen…"
"They'll listen," Turi said reassuringly. "The useful thing about the Empire is that the hierarchy is clear. If Moff Tanal tells them to follow your lead, that's what they'll do. They may not like it, but the alternative is charges of insubordination or death on the battlefield. That's not to say you shouldn't listen to the other pilots. You're right in that they are older and more experienced than you, so take their advice into account. By the end of the day, however, the only people you answer to are me, General Dorja, or Grand Moff Quille."
"So…we'll be on the front lines…killing people for the Empire," another Void Trooper said softly.
"You have another option," Turi replied evenly.
"I do?"
"There's always another option, Alind," Turi answered. "If you object to killing from a starfighter, I can post you outside of Sivan and Antalia's quarters to stand guard and see that they're not disturbed. They'll need their full concentration after all to make sure the others stay alive."
"I…yeah…that sounds…good…" Alind glanced left and right to the others in his squad.
It was Sivan who spoke up, however, offering the younger teen an encouraging nod. "Thanks, it's nice to know someone will have my sister and my back while we go all mystical."
"Just…" Alind took a deep breath and released it, looking at the others again. "Just keep them alive, okay?"
"Of course," Antalia spoke up confidently. "Sivan and I have trained for this moment for the past year and a half. No way we're letting our family down."
The transport, a Chiss personnel carrier, rolled to a stop, and the hatch opened. Awaiting them were two older Imperial pilots, both with too many years in the cockpit between them.
"Tan Steele, General Phenir," Turi inclined her head in greeting. "Thank you for agreeing to train them."
"It's our duty to serve the Empire, Colonel," veteran pilot Maarek Stele said curtly.
"Skulls, these two are your instructors for the time-being. Do yourselves and your unit proud," Turi patted each of the teens on the shoulder as they passed her and exited the vehicle. "Antalia, Sivan, you're with me."

Turi exited after the last Void Trooper, and the Imperial Jedi followed her out onto the planet. Noris had one time been a hospitable world, but the devastation by the Killiks, Chiss politics, and Yuuzhan Vong, had stripped it of most of its natural beauty. A charred desert landscape replaced what had once been a vibrant forest. Vast tracks of land were pockmarked with craters and littered with glassy rocks and gleaming surfaces. That's not to say the entire planet had the same appearance, but most of the damage had been done to the areas the Chiss family had populated. Areas that were now under Imperial control.

"A bit dry out here," Sivan commented mildly, a desert wind washing over the trio of Jedi. The landing platform had led them into a narrow gorge between a winding path of reddish-brown sandstone bluffs, a set up that trapped the wind perfectly.

The wind was hot and strong, and reminded Turi of the heat straight out of an open oven door. "And this is just the early morning."

"Joy," Antalia deadpanned, her black boots creating a small dust-cloud in her wake as she kept up with the rapid strides of her brother and mentor. "So, ma'am, what's on the schedule today?"

"Today you'll be getting better acquainted with the minds of your squadmates," Turi answered calmly. "Because they are not Jedi, they won't be able to openly broadcast their thoughts and emotions. It will be up to you to read their intentions and moves so you can better guide their actions. While they're in the simulators, you'll be eavesdropping in their heads, trying to see and perceive what they are. Tomorrow, we'll have live exercises in orbit where you'll then go one step further. The trick will be to turn the rest of the unit into extensions of yourselves. To let the Force flow through you and into them to help preserve as many lives as you can."

"Understood."

"Colonel."

"Go ahead Sivan."

"Have the Jedi ever done anything like this before?"

"No," Turi smirked. "We're the first. Theoretically, it should be possible. The Jedi Order has never tried to deliberately create a mixed unit like the ones we have in the Empire."

"That doesn't seem to be tactically sound. There are not enough Jedi to cover what needs to be done," Antalia spoke.

"Hey, I just follow orders, not make them," Turi shrugged. "But I've talked with Lord Argor and Master Katarn and they both agree that this might be what the Jedi Order sorely needs; a wake-up call that tells them that there are many others who are more than capable of

protecting the galaxy if given the chance. You don't need to wave a lightsaber around to make a difference."
The trio slowed as they reached Signata's primary estate, an ancient looking series of buildings carved straight out of the roan-colored sandstone mesa wall. From the worn colonnade out front, the mural-framed procession way to the main building, and the dust-covered reliefs that decorated the front of the building, one could easily imagine Signata in its prime. But that had been many decades ago. Merchant stalls still sat between the sandstone columns, and Chiss still went about their business, but much of the splendor appeared to have been lost in the interim.
"The Empire's fighting and people are dying for worlds like this?" Antalia raised an eyebrow as she took in the sights.
"It's the thought that counts, sister," Sivan muttered. "The Moff Council doesn't want a group of heavily armed non-humans on their border."
"I know that," Antalia said with a small huff. "But just look at this place. I can see the Chiss living happily in their little caves and going about their lives in peace, but I really pity whichever Moff or Imperial governor gets assigned here."
Sivan shrugged. "What's worse is that I hear that Ornfra is almost like Csilla, a ball of ice that only a Chiss could love. And already thousands of Imperial soldiers have died trying to take that system. The only thing we can do now is make sure they didn't die for nothing. We help end the war, make the Empire stronger, and go back to Taspir to train some more."
"What do you think about all this, Colonel?" Antalia, her light olive-colored skin and long dark hair looked distinctly exotic among the blue-skinned, blue-haired Chiss in the colonnade around them. Her brother was lighter skinned and both he and Turi were shorter than Antalia by a head. Coupled with her non-standard Imperial Jedi clothing, and the sixteen year old Imperial Jedi girl definitely stood out. "Is this what we're supposed to be doing as Imperial Jedi? Helping the Empire conquer others in the name of preserving the Empire?"
"No," Turi replied, her jaw clenched. "What we're supposed to be doing is learning from this. Learning how we can be a in a position to stop it the next time this happens."
"What?" Sivan blinked. "Walk into a meeting of the Moffs and wave our hands to stop a war?"
"If it will help in the long-run, yes," Turi answered, steel in her voice. "But if we have to keep doing it, then it's pointless. What we have to do as Imperial Jedi is be in a position to affect policy. We're warriors, but we need to fight our battles both out here in the battlefield and in the

political world. Otherwise, we'll end up like the Jedi Order and become lapdogs for a government desperate to hold onto power. The only thing we can do right now is end the war as quick as we can and learn from it. We may be loyal to the Empire, but I'm not about to throw your lives away for it."
"Thank you," Antalia murmured, smiling faintly at Turi. "It's nice to know at least someone is looking out for us."
"I try," Turi shrugged, slightly embarrassed at the awe and reverence she could feel radiate from the young teens.
"I take it your Master in the Jedi Order and pretty much everyone else doesn't share your views?" Sivan asked wryly.
"You guys know Mirta cares for you too," Turi protested. "And in their own twisted way, so do Lord Argor and the other Inquisitorious instructors."
"It's not the same, ma'am," Antalia shook her head. "Well, for Lord Argor and the others anyways. They see us as weapons for the Empire, a way to boost their status in the eyes of the Moffs and become useful to the Empire again. Instructor Kanos and the older Marek are only helping out to make sure Lord Argor and the others don't turn us into Sith Lords and Ladies. Instructor Gev is doing it for the paycheck, and the younger Marek sees his training us as an opportunity to affect the galaxy on a bigger scale than just being on his planet. You don't *have to* come to our training camp once every week, especially with your busy schedule, but you always found time for us."
"Listen, I'm really not anyone special," Turi blushed slightly, looking away. "I just…I guess when I managed to get a compromise from the Moffs and start the Imperial Jedi program, I wanted to make sure it wasn't another one of my mistakes. That I didn't just consign several dozen orphans to a fate worse than death. I mean, I agreed to have Sith train you guys for Empire's sake, who in their right mind would agree to that?"
"It worked out, kind of," Sivan chuckled in agreement. They reached the end of the colonnade and entered the shaded coolness of the main building. Artificial cooling systems kept the temperature just above freezing, perfectly comfortable for Chiss used to the cold climes of Csilla; not so for their Imperial 'guests'. The sudden change in temperature caused the trio to shudder for a second. "Look at 'Talia and I. We came out okay, I think."
"More than okay," Turi corrected fondly. "Just make sure the two of you stay that way. Help me keep the younger Imperial Jedi that way too while you're at it."
"The pains of being the big brother and sister," Sivan quipped.

"The pains of being the best," Antalia reworded with a mock-superior tilt of her head.
The trio headed through the building largely ignored by the Chiss within. Only a few of the younger Chiss children stopped what they were doing to openly stare. There was a general feeling of ambivalence in the building—as if the Chiss didn't care who they reported to, be it the Ascendancy or Remnant, so long as there was a proper chain of command and their people were cared for. They were just weary of the fighting and the death and really wanted no part in the war between the Remnant and their former overseers.
Turi led Antalia and Sivan into an artificial oasis created in the middle of the mesa. Water cascaded down from a fairly good-sized waterfall on one side, and meandered through the center of the room before pooling in a glistening lake. Sunlight shone through the circular opening cut into the ceiling, filtered by several taller trees that grew ever upwards towards freedom. A pavilion sat on the bank of the lake, surrounded by flowering shrubs and flats of grass. It was one of the few places where the flora native to Noris had managed to survive, one last slice of Noris before the conflicts had razed much of it.
"First thing we'll practice is centering exercises," Turi instructed, directing her charges to sit down in the pavilion. "Centering one's self when your ship is being shot up and death is occurring all around you is a lot harder than you might think. As Jedi, we're connected intrinsically to the Force. We can *feel* every death around us, no matter how small. The reason why Jedi don't fall to pieces when they're in battle is because they're taught to accept those deaths as a natural part of life. That people don't truly die, but rejoin the Force and become part of the mystical energy that we use to better the lives of others. For the position the two of you will take in the coming battle, it is imperative that you remain as level-headed and logical as possible. Even if you have to make a sacrifice that sits ill with you, you need to press on so that others can continue to live and so that those who died did not do so in vain."
"So we should enter a light trance then?" Sivan asked.
"Yes. But as you do so, I'll begin projecting my experiences during the Yuuzhan Vong War to you. Some of the experiences will also be from Jedi Ambassador Jaina Solo, who shared them with me at my request when the Imperial Jedi were first founded. I'll start slowly, but increase the experiences in severity. Stay as calm and in control as you can."
Sivan and Antalia nodded once, and closed their eyes, immersing themselves into the Force.

Turi regarded them almost regretfully. "Forgive me, you two. With the battle in a couple of days, this is the best way I can think of that will maximize your chances of getting everyone in your unit back in one piece."

After several long seconds, just as they began to reach equilibrium, images began to flash through their minds. They were onboard a starship, a fighter battle was taking place and they could only watch as lives, one by one, were snuffed out by hopeless odds. Another image, they were running, being chased. People they recognized as being from the nearby village fell around them and they were completely helpless to stop it. Another, this time they were witnessing the death of a Star Destroyer, *feeling* hundreds of lives disappear with every explosion.

Then, the images changed. They could see the smiling faces of several teenagers, all of them huddled around a campfire, listening and telling stories. The teens were absolutely terrified, but were taking comfort in the presence of the others. But that idyllic moment passed. A plasma projectile roared out and blew a hole into one of the teens who had just stood to begin his story. Panic flared, and Antalia and Sivan shared in Turi's distress as she ran, feeling her friends die all around her.

Another set of images, this time of the famed Ganner Rhysode. Antalia and Draco could feel the bonds of friendship he had established with many Jedi. Could *feel* how he had felt in the Force when he had been alive. They shared in his adventures, years passing in a matter of seconds, until they reached that fateful day. The sudden abruptness in which his grandstanding aura vanished. The aching absence of a friend no longer with them but with the Force.

More images, the final battle where millions died. Running and fearing. Fighting for one's life. Surviving when no one else did. Grief, regret, as Turi shared more and more, she found herself unable to stop. Someone had to understand what she had gone through so that no one else would…someone.

By the time Turi was finished, tears were running down Antalia and Sivan's cheeks, their trance and the lesson long forgotten. Turi herself was ashen in color, her face almost wooden. Without a single word between them, Sivan and Antalia stood as one and promptly engulfed their instructor in a comforting hug, reaching out through the Force to take away her pain.

"Sorry guys," Turi managed hoarsely. "I just…I don't want you guys losing friends and family…like Jaina and I. I just want…"

"You don't have to say it, Colonel," Antalia muttered. "It's the same thing Sivan and myself and the rest of our unit want. The same thing

Units Two, Three, Four, and Five all want even if they might not realize it yet. Siv and I will keep our family alive, we promise. You and the others have trained us well, so keep on training us. Keep on showing us what happens when our training lets us down so we know how to be better. We're Imperial Jedi, Colonel Altamik, trained by Jedi both light and dark. There hasn't been Jedi like us in the galaxy before, and we're going to show the galaxy what they've been missing."
"'Talia's right," Sivan backed up his sister. "It'll start with me and her, but soon the others will be of age and be able to join us. Vetter and Sinde, Drae and Sa'kai, they're only two years behind me, three behind 'Talia, they'll be at our side in no time."
Turi just smiled half-heartedly and nodded. "Okay, enough of the touchy-feely stuff. Get back into your meditation and try to reach out to your unit. I'll inject both urgency and fear just to keep you guys on your toes. Right now you need to get used to finding their minds no matter how vast the distance. Finding and perceiving as they do. More will come tomorrow."
"Yes, ma'am," Sivan and Antalia both saluted sharply.
"Get to it." Turi said with forced optimism. It was extremely hard to do because her mind and heart were not only elsewhere, but in another time too. It had been so long since she had recalled the many memories. And since the mob-violence in the market several weeks ago, the memories were coming easier, much to her chagrin.
Her apprentices re-entered their trance, and Turi vainly tried to separate her emotions from the memories they were attached to.
There was no emotion, only peace.
No chaos, only harmony.
No death, only the Force.
But no matter how many times she recited the maxim in her head, her heart refused to obey.
]-)-III-(-[
Ten Years Ago- Outer Rim Planet Edusa
"You're a terrible liar, Kensig," Fifteen year old Jedi Apprentice, Turi Altamik laughed, shaking her head. She was surrounded by a group of teenagers at several outdoor benches in front of the city-center, headquarters of the mining operations within the Edusa system. They were all in casual mining outfits, taking a break after the morning labor shifts.
Charming, dark-haired sixteen year old Kensig Soli, face stained with soot, affected a wounded look. "Me lying? Come on, Altamik, I wouldn't do that to you."

"Apart from the fact you're horrible at it, I *am* a Jedi you know," Turi rolled her eyes, running a hand through her hair to shake free some of the debris that had been caught in her blond locks. The others with her chuckled. "Besides, I would have to be completely daft to believe that the ore on Edusa Three, the ore that powers several systems and is worth its weight in credits, is fossilized space-worm excrement. I may not know a thing about mining, but really Kensig?"
"Hey, you believed me when I told you we had teams of Gamoreans doing our mining for us."
"I only let you believe I believed you," Turi stuck her tongue out. "Besides, don't you have anything better to do than pick on a city-girl like me?"
Kensig pretended to think, then shook his head along with the rest of the group. In unison they smiled and said, "Nope."
Turi just smiled and gave Kensig a friendly shove. She had been on Edusa for four months now; thanks to her parents' contacts and the fact that Edusa had once been a proud, card-carrying member of the Galactic Empire. Though wary at first, the planet's small mining hamlets had eventually warmed to her, and she had made quite a few friends. Among them was the attractive Kensig, son of the system's governor, and she had taken some small delight when he had given her a personal tour of the planet. Even on a backwater place like Edusa, with Kensig and her new friends, it was hard to believe that an intergalactic war had just been started. That Ithor and Sernpedial were uninhabited balls of rock.
Almost as if her thoughts had jinxed her, she caught sight of a harried militia officer sprinting across the dirt road from the militia barracks. The man's face was sheet-white and Turi could feel nothing but fear pulsate from him. He continued his urgent trek, disappearing into the city-center without breaking stride.
Turi's friends picked up on where she was looking, and immediately sobered.
"Come on," Kensig said gruffly. "I can get us in HQ. Perks of being the governor's son."
The group abandoned their casual time in the afternoon sun and quickly followed the militiaman in. Passing a checkpoint with only a lazy wave from the guard, they piled into the central room.
"We have a problem!"
The room, full of the governor, several representatives from different planets in the system, and other wealthy and influential people all enjoying a light, afternoon drink, fell silent.

"Problem?" The governor said slowly, setting down his tumbler and slowly rising. "Please explain, lieutenant."
"We were wrong about the Vong!" The messenger gasped. "The scar-heads doubled back and just took the Vandyne system! A pair of refugee ships barely made it out of there and have landed here requesting sanctuary."
A low murmuring broke out between those in the room, fear and anger oscillating rapidly as they absorbed the information.
"M…maybe they're just using it to mount an attack on the Ciutric Hegemony," stammered one of the influential citizens. "Edusa has nothing but mining operations."
"But the Vong hate people who ruin a planet's ecosystem for wealth," Kensig spoke up. "Given that half of Edusa was dug up and carted off to our trading partners, I don't think the Vong will be too friendly with us."
"Kensig, no need to frighten the others unnecessarily." The governor rebuked. He nodded to the others. "Perhaps Representative Karn is right. Lieutenant, have the Vong shown any signs that they're continuing to advance in our direction?"
"Well…no…"
"So they've only taken Vandyne at the moment?"
"Yes, sir."
"And these Vandyne refugees, they thought it safe enough to retreat here and stop?"
"Er…yes, sir."
"Then I see no reason to stir up trouble or invite it. If we lay low, maybe the whole war will blow over and we'll have worried over nothing."
"But dad!"
"Kensig," the governor glared.
"You heard the reports on what they did to Sernpidal! The New Republic forces haven't been able to stop the Vong."
"Enough!" The governor glowered. "Kensig, you and your friends may leave now. The Yuuzhan Vong aren't coming to Edusa, and we won't provoke them in any way to do so. Representatives, let's shut down our mines temporarily. If the Vong are hitting the Hegemony, then our major trading partner won't be able to pay its bills anyways."
Further protests fell on deaf ears, so the group of teens left the room.
"Your dad's crazy, you know that?" Turi quipped, feeling anxiety rise in her stomach as she gazed about the settlement that had been her home for several months. "We have to start evacuations, or at least call a New Republic fleet for help."

"You're a Jedi, can't you just contact your masters and have *them* send help?" Asked one of the other teens, evidently shaken by the news like some of the others in the room had been.
"I…" Before Turi could answer, her comlink pinged. "One moment, getting a message routed from my ship."
"Your parents?" Kensig asked.
"Probably."
"Great, maybe they can send help."
"Highly doubt that," Turi pressed a few buttons. "This is Altamik."
"*Daughter."*
"Hi father, checking in?"
"*Word about Vandyne has reached me here. Your mother and I have arranged for another safehouse further away from the frontlines."*
"I'm just fine, father. Thanks for asking," Turi replied darkly.
"Don't talk back to me, Turi. I am your father. Now, you will get on your ship and go to the coordinates I've sent you. The governor of Noonar will be expecting you."
"And what about everyone else here?" Turi hissed.
"They are the governor's responsibility. Not yours. The Yuuzhan Vong have put an open bounty on the head of any Jedi, and it would reflect poorly if your mother and myself were unable to shield you from simple bounty hunters."
"But…"
"Do as your mother and I wish, Turi. The people of Edusa are not your concern. They have merely been the tool with which we used to shield you from the outset of the war. Go to Noonar. You will be safe there."
"Until the Vong get there."
"*At which point we will move you to another safehouse."*
"So what, I'm just supposed to forget about what will happen to everyone here? Father, I'm a Jedi…"
"*And what will that mean if you're dead? Even that Jedi Horn couldn't stop a Vong fleet from razing Ithor. What chance do you have?"*
Turi clenched her jaw, tears coming to her eyes. She tried to avoid looking at her friends, understanding full well what would happen. That she was completely helpless to stop it. And that this was probably one of the last times she would see them alive.
"Turi," Kensig said softly. "Go."
The blond Jedi jerked her head towards the teen. "Kens…I just can't leave…"
"Yes you can," Kensig said, forcing out a brave smile. She didn't need to Force to feel his terror. "You're not just an anybody, a refugee, or soldier. You're a Jedi. Somehow, some day, you're supposed to make a

difference in the galaxy. Your dad's right. You can't make a difference if you're dead."
"Then what about you all?" Turi gestured with her comlink. "Do you seriously think I'm just going to let you all become Vong-bait?"
"We'll be okay."
"You're a terrible liar," Turi retorted half-heartedly. This time the dread shone in her eyes as she stared up at the older teen.
"This is our home, Turi," Kensig placed a hand on her shoulder. "The only corner of the galaxy we've ever known. It may be an out-of-the-way mining outpost with delusions of being part of a greater Empire, but it's still our home. Not yours."
"But…"
"Turi," one of the others spoke up. The other teen offered an equally fear-filled smile. "Go, please, for us. Maybe, somehow, we'll still come out of this."
"I…I…" Turi looked to one face to the next, her heart clenching painfully. Finally, she just bowed her head in defeat and nodded.
"Just one request, Turi," Kensig almost whispered.
"Anything?"
"We may be a backwater in the back end of nowhere, but don't forget us, okay?"
Turi sniffled and nodded, taking his hand into her own. "Never."
Five hours later, she was in the mountains overlooking the village, running through the pre-flight checklist onboard the *Altamik Flier*. Efforts to convince the governor to evacuate the system had fallen on deaf ears. The governor remained firmly convinced that the war would 'blow over' and pass them by. Akin to sticking one's head into the ground, it was almost business as usual for the handful of inhabited planets and moons in the system. With the governor and militia not budging, no one wanted to listen to a group of teenagers preaching about doom. When it had become apparent that no amount of convincing would work, Turi finally admitted defeat. She shared one last dinner with her friends, before practically being forced by them to the city-limits.
It had been one of the hardest decisions to make, and even onboard her ship, she continued to tell herself that what she was doing was for the better.
"Last chance to come with me guys," Turi said with a forced laugh, holding the comm-button down.
"*Good luck out there, Altamik,"* Kensig sent back, communicating back from the city-center. "*For what it's worth. May the Force be with you."*
Turi closed her eyes, not bothering to hide her tears. "Yeah, thanks."

Kensig's next message had a bit of urgency to it. "*Altamik, get out of here! A Vong frigate was just picked up on long-range sensors! They'll be here in five."*
Turi's stomach acid rose. She leaned forward to peer out the cockpit window down at the city below. "Get out of there!"
"*No time. We have to try and get the civilians evacuated. I'm the governor's son after all."*
"Kensig!" Turi yelled.
"Got to go. You should too!"
Turi bit down on her lower lip, finishing the last of the checklist. She took a breath and called out to her ship's AI. "Father, start up the engines and get me a trajectory away from the city."
The words 'trajectory plotted' appeared on the console. Turi started up the engines, and her *Delta*-class JV-Seven shuttle hummed as it began to rise from the ground. As it did, however, a flash of yellow lit up the upper atmosphere, temporarily brightening the cloudy night's sky. Turi immediately placed a hand to the window, horror and dread filling her. Almost in slow motion, her Force-assisted senses tracked the ball of plasma from air to ground. It impacted squarely with the city-center, a ball of fire erupting up in an instant.
In a panic, Turi thumbed the comlink again. "Kensig! Kensig! Come in damn it!"
The atmosphere flashed again, and two more streaks of plasma boiled away the water in the air in their downward course. Two more explosions erupted from the mining city. All Turi could do was keep her hand against the cool transparasteel window and shake her head in denial.
A flight of coralskippers screamed down through the clouds, guns blazing. Smaller explosions blossomed up from the city. With most of the population asleep, they never stood a chance. It was almost as if the Yuuzhan Vong was razing the place simply because they could.
The *Altamik Flier* chose that moment to rotate away and dart through the mountain range. When that happened, the only thing Turi could do was stare at the rear-view on her main console, watching as her home of several months went up in flame. She wasn't the strongest in the Force, but she could literally feel lives disappear by the handful.
"I'm sorry guys," Turi breathed, squeezing her eyes shut. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her ship angled upwards and away, the stealth systems paid for by her wealthy politician parents allowing it to avoid detection by the lone Yuuzhan Vong frigate in orbit. "I'm so sorry."

She bowed her head, unable to stop crying as her ship leaped into hyperspace. The blue vortex of hyperspace offered little comfort. She hugged herself with her arms, drawing her legs up to her chest. She vowed repeatedly not to let another Edusa happen, to stay at the next place and fight with everything she had. She wasn't a warrior or soldier by any means, but the feeling of helplessness gnawed at her very soul. Little did she know that her pledge would be for naught. That Edusa would only be the first of many homes she would see burn. That Kensig and the others would be the first of many friends she would outlive. And the first of many times she would be completely powerless to stop her world from crumbling around her.

]-)-IV-(-[

Present time

Turi linked herself to the Force, sensing what her teenage apprentices were sensing as they sat at the forefront of the *Bloodfin*'s bridge. Three days of non-stop prep and training were now about to be demonstrated in a friendly war-game. Outside, another Imperial taskforce imitating Chiss tactics maneuvered, and several squadrons of TIE Interceptors and Defenders mimicked the agile Clawcraft. The lasers of both fleets had been reprogrammed to fire non-damaging bursts. A computer program would record the number of 'hits' and designate a ship or fighter as 'destroyed.' The 'destroyed' vessel would then have to drift where it was, acting as battlefield debris.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Moff Tanal asked dubiously.

"Just watch," Turi replied, the bridge chatter in the background keeping a constant din in the air.

"Admiral Jeratai is a brilliant tactician, his hatred of the Chiss drives him, and the fact that he had been captured by the New Republic has twisted his mind even further," the female Moff shook her head. "I fail to see how two teens in the midst of puberty can best him."

Admiral Jeratai's fleet massed several light minutes away, changing formation every couple of minutes to keep the smaller 'Imperial' fleet guessing.

He's reckless, Antalia's thoughts filtered into Turi's mind, disapproval lacing every syllable. *Even from here we can feel his bloodlust. The only thing holding him back is that he knows the Chiss would never strike first and he has to play by the rules.*

It must be killing him to listen to his Chiss advisors, Sivan added in amusement.

Turi let her lips quirk upwards into a half-smile. "So, my apprentices, your opening move?"

Sivan replied verbally, rattling off a list of orders even though his eyes were completely closed. The bridge crew paused for a moment, glancing towards Moff Tanal.
"You have your orders," the Moff said tersely. "Carry them out."
At once, the chatter on the bridge increased in volume, comm-officers sending orders to fighter squadrons and other capital ships in a flurry of motion. The 'Imperial' fleet began to move, its formation abandoning orthodox Imperial stragems in favor of what appeared to be an unorganized mess.
"We'll be more efficient if we send the orders directly to the officers involved," Antalia spoke up, her forehead creased.
"Will you be able to maintain focus on the battlegroup?" Turi asked aloud.
"Sivan or myself can temporarily take control while the other issues the orders."
"Do it."
All at once, the Force seemed to surge around the two Draco siblings. The officers in the bridge jolted in both alarm and fear, eyes flicking up to the two teens as they began to hear Antalia and Sivan's voices in their heads. Slowly but surely, the bridge began to work at an even greater speed, efficiently coordinating commands like never before. This resulted in fightercraft maneuvering in perfect sync with the capital ships. Captains of vessels somehow knowing where their support would come from, knowing where there were holes in their defenses. Orders and their intentions were clear, leaving no doubt in the minds of those receiving them what they were supposed to do.
Admiral Jeratai's fleet, seeing the non-standard formation approach, momentarily halted their formation shifting. They tried to determine just what it was that was coming at them, but couldn't seem to identify the strategy being used. He formed a smaller taskforce of several light cruisers and a Star Destroyer, and used a fighter screen to launch a probing attack.
Rather than engage, the closest parts of the 'Imperial' fleet seemed to recoil as if burned, folding back into the rest of the fleet behind it. Another probing attack, another 'retreat,' the 'Imperial' fleet denying the 'Chiss' fleet combat. As if interpreting the reluctance to attack as a fear of his abilities, Admiral Jeratai quickly formed up the rest of his fleet for a sudden surge.
Turi had to hide a smile as she sensed her apprentices' idea, shaking her head almost ruefully. Imperial or Chiss, due to their adherence to the chain of command, the fleet was only as strong as the ones in command. Rather than slog their way through the enemy fleet, both

Antalia and Draco had assigned numerical values to the ships they identified as 'command' ships. Much like the Imperials had done against Yuuzhan Vong yammosk vessels during the war, the 'Imperial' fleet was now geared towards these 'command' ships and had maneuvered themselves for optimal firing solutions. The trick was to minimize losses and maximize the casualties inflicted.

The seconds and distance passed quickly. Admiral Jeratai's fleet opened fire as they charged headlong into the center of the 'Imperial' fleet, seemingly trying to collapse it into itself. At the last moment, however, the admiral's fleet swung about to the right flank of the 'Imperial' fleet, trying to cut them off from the rest of the fleet.

"Nice move," Turi remarked, watching as the monitor that displayed the 'health' indicator of the *Bloodfin*. Shields were already taking a pummeling, and the computer likewise marked several turbolaser batteries as being 'hit' by enemy missiles. "Not nearly enough though."

True to Turi's words, that was as far as Admiral Jeratai got.

Antalia and Draco's plan kicked into gear. Despite being dummy-rounds, no Star Destroyer commander enjoyed seeing multiple squadrons of fighters fire warheads at their bridge-tower. The coordination provided by the Force meant that the squadrons could cover for one and other even with enemy fighters trying to swoop in to disrupt the firing runs. The minutes ticked by, and the displays on the *Bloodfin*'s bridge indicated that nearly every command ship in Admiral Jeratai's fleet had been knocked out. After that, any vessel that appeared to try and take command of the situation was targeted by a mass of fighter-borne laser runs. Not helping matters was the demoralizing affect the Force had on the remains of Admiral Jeratai's people. Every ship knocked out of the fight sunk morale far lower than it normally would have, until things seemed absolutely hopeless.

A half-hour into the training exercise, and Admiral Jeratai's fleet had been utterly decimated…and this was after they had tried to withdraw mid-way through.

"You were saying, Moff Tanal?" Turi said smugly.

To her credit, Moff Tanal managed to keep her jaw from dropping, though her eyes did seem a bit stunned. "Admiral Jeratai has led over a dozen campaigns. How…"

"That, Moff Tanal, is the power of the Force," Turi answered. She looked over to her apprentices. "Go check on your unit, think about how to improve things, then take the rest of the day off. We'll have one more training skirmish tomorrow, and in two days we make another attempt on Ornfra."

"With your Jedi leading us, this war should be done in no time," Moff Tanal remarked, saluting the two apprentices as they walked past.
Turi raised an eyebrow. "If it were so easy to for Jedi to win wars, Moff Tanal, the Yuuzhan Vong War would have been over in a year."
"Then what is your opinion, Jedi Altamik? I thought they did quite well."
"There's a great deal of difference fighting a practice skirmish and fighting a group of people who want to protect their homes and families. Battle-Meditation works best when one side believes in their cause more fully than the other. If our men and women fighting in our ships have even the slimmest of doubts that this war is best for the Empire, then the beliefs of the Chiss whose homes we are threatening will ultimately win out in the end. Besides, the Force is not infinite despite what some masters say. Antalia and Sivan can only do so much. Like any elite soldier, you push them too hard, use them for too many conflicts, and they'll burn out."
"Then let us hope they can win us several decisive victories so all the Imperial fleets will need to do is mop up what is left."
"Yes," Turi replied with a poisonous smile. "Let's. I'll tell you what, Moff Tanal. Why don't you pick several engagements you predict you'll need the Imperial Jedi for? We'll train for those. That way we don't burn out our resources and get ourselves in a bind later."
"An excellent idea. And to think, if we can accomplish this much with only two Imperial Jedi, what will happen when the other ten are ready to join our ranks?"
]-)-V-(-[
Turi wasn't able to sleep as her thoughts continued to spiral about in her head. It seemed the Jedi thing to do, end a war as fast as possible and minimize the number of casualties. Neither side wanted to go to the table, not when both believed they were morally right. Especially not when the Empire thought that the war was winnable and were throwing credits and people into the conflict like never before. A Jedi was supposed to save lives, and she was doing it the only way she knew how—by making sure the Imperials won such a decisive victory that the Chiss would sue for peace and end the fighting. There was no doubt that the longer the war went on, the more lives would be in jeopardy and the more desperate one side would get.
But was what she doing right? After years of running and hiding, she was finally in a position to make a difference. Finally in a position to save lives and change an otherwise undesirable result. Yet, to do so, she was literally aiding the Empire in a war that boiled down to race and resources. Sacrificing the lives of the Chiss military to minimize the lives lost on the Imperial side. Of course, one could argue she was

sparing the millions of Chiss colonists from prolonged garrisons and orbital bombardments, but even that sounded like a poor excuse to her.

Keeping Antalia and Sivan from directly killing sentient beings was one thing, but the two teens were still going to orchestrate one of the greatest mass-killings of Chiss in the coming engagements. An orchestration that she had made possible and approved. It went against everything she was taught a Jedi should do. But what other choice did she have?

She couldn't be like the older Jedi who preached and preached about tolerance and harmony until her ears bled and her eyes rolled. For one, the Empire most definitely didn't run on 'Jedi morals.' Neither did the galaxy for that matter; and trying to impose her 'Jedi way' of doing things on others was a sure way to get herself blacklisted in a Palpatine second. The Jedi Way hadn't stopped the Vong from raising Edusa or the many of the other worlds that perished in the Yuuzhan Vong War, and certainly had stopped the war from occurring in the first place.

For another, if she had the ability to end the war quickly, shouldn't she take it regardless of the methods? To sit back and do nothing, to show apathy to the situation or hide behind her Jedi code of 'non-interventionalism,' would mean the deaths of thousands of Imperial and Chiss. Apathy was death, yet to do something meant that she wasn't following the Jedi code.

A long, drawn out discussion with Master Katarn at the onset of the war had been utterly unhelpful. As wise and experienced as he was, a generational gap was definitely exposed. There were the Jedi of his generation, trying to legitimize their Order by following the teachings of the previous Order as best they could. They wagged a finger at the dark side, justified their actions with interpretations of the Jedi Code, and blindly believed that things would turn out for the better if they stayed the course. His generation had grown up when the threat of the dark side was very real, with Vader, Palpatine, the Dark Side Prophets, and all manner of dark side baddies trying to take over the galaxy. They were determined to separate themselves from those specters of the past, determined not to follow in their footsteps or let their apprentices go 'dark. ' The Jedi Masters of Katarn's order were more worried about the means used to achieve the goal, and not the actual goal itself.

And then there was her generation, realizing that those teachings were for a different era and different Order. That everything *wouldn't* fit together nicely if they just waited for the Force to make things right.

They constantly had to make exceptions in the Jedi Code to do what had to be done. Sacrifice people, planets, feelings, sometimes morals, to ensure that the 'Jedi way' was carried out.
Despite the propaganda, she didn't doubt for one second that Anakin Solo had been shipped off to Zonama Sekot because of his beliefs. That Jacen Solo's rise had halted because older Jedi Masters and Knights were too wary of his Unifying Force theories. Both had tried to make some sense of a shattered galaxy because the Jedi Code definitely didn't help in that matter. After all, the Jedi may follow a logical code, but that doesn't mean the rest of the galaxy played by the same rules.
Turi let out a breath, walking to the viewport of her cabin and staring out into the stars. Even the first stanza of the Jedi Code was flawed in oh so many ways. 'There is no emotion, there is only peace'? She wondered what type of galaxy the creators of the Jedi Code had been living in to come up with that. She sure as Kessel had emotions, ones that grew with her increasing frustration between her job and the limitations set upon her by the Jedi Code. And peace? If there was only peace, given the current state of war between the Chiss and Empire, she'd hate to see what chaos and violence looked like.
All those thoughts and more continued to run through her mind. It wasn't that she resented being a Jedi. In fact, she thought of the Jedi as the family she never really had. Lauded their goals and desire to bring galaxy-wide peace and prosperity. But there were times when she wondered if she could do more if she left the Jedi Order and not toed the company line. Times that grew in frequency as the years went on. The Imperial Jedi had been her 'compromise' with Grand Moff Quille's attempts to restart the Inquisitorious. But to tell the truth, she had been all too eager to start a 'Jedi' academy without the oversight of her Master and those on Denon.
And now she was at a crossroads. She absently pressed a hand to the transparasteel window, pensive green eyes reflected back at her. If she went through with this, helped the Empire win their war by massacring the Chiss, she doubted the High Council would keep her as the Jedi Ambassador to the Empire any further. They'd probably recall her, place her on leave so she could 'find herself' again and reflect on her actions. But if doing what she was doing was not what a Jedi of the Jedi Order would do, what did that make her?
She spun around in frustration, squeezing her eyes shut to prevent a fresh set of tears. When she opened her eyes again, they settled on the small cloth patch on her quarter's desk. It was the unofficial emblem of the Imperial Jedi emblazoned on the shoulder pads of all the

Void Troopers and Imperial Jedi trainees. It was a simple design in standard Imperial gray; a single lit lightsaber over the Imperial crest. Almost on a whim, Turi picked up the cloth patch and let her thumb trace the stitching of the crest. After several seconds, she shook her head and placed the patch back down.
She had to be mad. She couldn't leave the Jedi Order, leave the only place she had known since she had been just a toddler.
She looked out the viewport again, then glanced back to the patch. But then again…maybe she wouldn't have a choice. She reached into her desk and pulled out the latest holocron she had been recording for Tionne. With a weary sigh, she sunk into the chair at her desk and activated the device.
"This is Jedi Knight Turi Altamik. Owing to the events that will soon unfold, this will likely be my last entry in my official capacity as the Jedi Order's ambassador to the Imperial Remnant. The only regret I have is that the Jedi Order in all its infinite wisdom decided to name me to this post in the first place. What I will say next will not justify the plans I have set in motion, but will hopefully help future Jedi avoid this no-win situation I've gotten myself into…"
]-)-Chapter End-(-[

Jacen
]-)-I-(-[
Jacen briefly wondered if this is what it felt like to go against everything people assumed, to overturn tradition or go against political sanity. It was a surreal feeling. That little bit of him that continued to tell him that what he was doing was crazy, wasn't a 'Jedi' thing to do, churned his stomach. Here he was, Jedi Order Senator, leading a force of Jedi and allies of the Jedi Order to the Hapes Cluster solely because of a little selfishness. Jedi weren't supposed to usher in wars, they were supposed to end them. In his command were a dozen capital ships, troop vessels, and squadrons of fighters from a myriad of systems. From his vantage point aboard the bridge of the newly made *Rejuvenator*-class Star Destroyer, the *Anja Gallandro,* the glowing green of the Transitory Mist was a dead giveaway as to where they were. Officially, they were going to Hapes to act as a deterrent, warding the Corellians away from any additional acts of provocation. Unofficially, they were going to Hapes to hunt down an infestation of Killiks and help ensure Tenel Ka stayed in power.
Staring out the bridge window, down the uniquely yellow-painted prow of the ship—done so in honor of Anja's lightsaber—Jacen couldn't think of a greater abuse of his position than what he was doing now. His

brooding reflection was an almost invisible ghost in the cooled transparasteel window.
It all came down to the safety of his daughter, and his lover; and for some reason, that was supposed to justify what he was doing. It rankled him to no end. But at the same time, to do nothing meant that his family would be placed in great danger. He was doing everything Vergere had warned him not to do, giving into his feelings and choosing Tenel Ka over the safety of the galaxy. If it wasn't for the fact that his brother was staying on at Denon trying to track down one of the Killik threats, and that their father had actually told him to go, Jacen knew that he would have been swallowed up by his own doubt and second-guessing.
As if he wasn't already.
He was supposed to be the cool voice of reason for the Jedi Order. Not rushing off because of the fear clenching his heart like an ever-tightening vice. Anakin was supposed to be the emotional one, not logically sacrificing the happiness of his family so he could combat the problems of a broken galaxy. If there was one thing Jacen knew he wasn't good at, it was dealing with his emotions on any level. Jedi weren't trained to do so, Vergere had encouraged him to kill those emotions as best as he could. Given that he was now rushing to Hapes because of said feelings, he obviously needed to do a better job.
A professional voice cleared his throat politely from behind. "Jedi Knight Solo."
Jacen turned away from the Star Destroyer bridge window, his brown cloak swirling slightly as he faced the officer behind him. With his face an emotionless mask, and his body backlit by the green glow of the Transitory Mists, Jacen tilted his head slightly in acknowledgment. "Captain Serpa?"
The blond-haired Captain Salle Serpa was a Yuuzhan Vong War veteran who was among the many soldiers who had seen things that would have driven a lesser person insane. Those experiences had shaped him, and not in a good way. Jacen appreciated the man's emotional detachment not only from the mission but from his own subordinates and fellow officers. In fact, if the man was a Jedi, he would be the epitome of what Vergere preached. Someone who's only thought was of completing the mission, regardless of how long it took or the cost. After the war, the man had been one more bad step from being drummed out of the navy, but the sudden rise in pirate attacks meant that the Galactic Alliance Navy couldn't afford *not* to keep someone of his extensive experience. So instead, the Jedi, famed for helping broken individuals, had offered to take him in.

Saluting crisply, the captain spoke. "Sir, we have an incoming message from the Corellians. You wished to be informed if they contacted us."
"Thank you, captain. You are dismissed."
Jacen strode down the walkway to the communication's alcove just before the bridge doors.
There, Nelani was talking with a hologram of Omwati Jedi Apprentice Tiu Zax. "Oh, here he is now."
"*Senator Solo,"* the blue-skinned teenage Jedi bowed respectfully. "*The Corellians received your message via the courier you sent. Considering how we are now in contact with each other, can I assume you have arrived within the Hapes Cluster?"*
"I have. What is the Corellian's current position with regards to the conflict?"
"*Officially, the Corellians will continue to back our Hapan allies and support them in their cause."*
"And unofficially?"
"*We are aware that the Heritage Council has been wholly compromised by Killik Joiners and are attempting to rectify the situation on our end. Unfortunately, no matter what we do, Corellia is caught in a bit of a bind. If we begin to fire on Heritage Council planets with the intent to burn out the Killiks, the rest of the Consortium will assume Corellia is invading. If we pull our forces out and let the Hapans and your forces do whatever it is you plan to do, Corellia will look weak in the eyes of her allies. Corellia swore to help the Heritage Council and we can't exactly say 'We're sorry, our allies were actually controlled by giant bugs so we can't honor the arrangement.' Who in this galaxy would actually believe something like that?"*
"So you have no plans to attack Hapes?" Jacen pressed.
"*The Corellian Jedi do not, no. Admiral Karathas in charge of this fleet says that the Corellians will follow the lead of the Heritage Council, but remain in the back of any fleet formation. Now that the truth is known, Corellia doesn't want to be involved in this any more than it already is."*
"So how do the Corellians intend to 'rectify' the situation," Jacen asked.
"I have my own ideas and I don't want to step on each other's toes."
"*Since discovering the Killiks on Terephon, Corellian vessels have been scanning planets within Heritage Council control. We have since uncovered ten planets with infestations, and probable Killik presences on a dozen others. We believe that Relephon might be the headquarters of the Killik presence, but are not certain. We are currently waiting for Jedi Knight Horn to decide on the next step."*
"Okay, is it possible for me to speak to Jedi Knight Horn?"

"*No,"* Tiu shook her head, the white feathers on top ruffling slightly as she did. "*Both my master and Jedi Knight Jysella Horn are currently not with the fleet. They believe they can use Jysella's bond with former Jedi Alema Rar to track down the main perpetrator of this conflict and departed shortly before the arrival of your courier. Right now we are holding position in several systems, waiting for the Heritage Council or the Killiks to make their next moves."*
"If I understand you correctly, the Corellian fleet wants out, but politically can't leave without damaging their image. They know of the Killik threat, but short of razing Hapan planets, they can't do anything about them. And the Corellians want to avoid a war, but at the same time are trapped into one due to their stated obligations."
"*That about covers it."*
"Is there anything about the Corellian position that will allow you to cede control of Killik-infested Heritage Council systems?"
"We…could consolidate our forces. One moment, Admiral Karathas would like to talk to you."
The hologram expanded as the elderly Corellian Admiral joined the picture. "*Jedi Solo, technically, what you propose <u>is</u> possible. However, we would want something in return."*
"If it is within reason," Jacen replied evenly.
"*When you are finished eradicating the Killik presence in whatever system we cede to you, we would like you to surrender them back to Corellian and Heritage Council forces. We can even put on a display of force if you wish to save face."*
"So the Corellians will appear to be the liberators, returning the planets back to their ruling families."
"*Yes*."
"You do realize that if the Heritage Council forces have been compromised, they could very well re-infest the planet. Similarly, if the Heritage Council is moving against the current Queen Mother, they would be guilty of treason and their possessions forfeit. Also, if we relinquished control of the systems back to you, the joint alliance led by the Jedi Order will look weak."
"*And if we Corellians just left planets of our allies undefended, what type of message would that send to <u>our</u> allies? Look at it this way, young man. We can continue this stand-off, in which case the Killiks will mass and eventually launch their attack. You can try to bring your forces against the Corellian-Heritage Council alliance and both sides will suffer heavy casualties before the Killiks launch their attack. Or you can compromise with Corellia. What's more important to you, the*

appearance of weakness or the actual safety of the Hapan Consortium?"
"I have a counter offer. Turn on the Heritage Council, and we'll say that the Corellians were working with the Queen Mother all along trying to root out the Killik threat. That only by getting close to the threat could we locate all the individuals involved. Corellia comes out as the Galactic Alliance's strongest ally, Hapes remains unified, and the Jedi Order once again has helped to solve a crisis in the making."
"*I would need to contact Coronet for permission to accept such offer,"* the Corellian Admiral replied. "*And I would need a guarantee by the Queen Mother that she will hold Corellia blameless and will support your version of events."*
"I am on my way to Hapes as we speak. Send whatever couriers you have to. I know Corellia has no desire to be embroiled any further than it already has. I will speak with the Queen Mother and request she agree to these terms."
"*Then pending the approval of the Prime Minister and the Queen Mother, we have an accord. The moment we receive guarantees on your end, we will systematically abandon Heritage Council worlds infested with the Killiks to your forces and began our withdrawal from the sector."*
"Your cooperation is most appreciated."
"*Corellian flagship Halcyon, out."*
The blue glow of the hologram died off.
"So," Nelani began hesitantly, following Jacen into his office just outside of the bridge. "Was that a victory?"
"Only if the Prime Minister and Tenel Ka agree," Jacen shook his head in negative. "And I think it will be hard to convince both. Everyone will be able to see through the political move, and the Corellians will lose face no matter what. Their forces have also already committed crimes against the Hapan Consortium, and to pardon them will put Tenel Ka in a position of weakness. I just hope the admiral and Jedi Apprentice Zax can emphasize the threat the Killiks pose. If not, we're all going to see fleets of burning ships and planets when the two sides destroy each other."
"Like the Chiss and the Remnant."
"Exactly. This Killik threat has to be nipped in the bud, and that will only happen if the different sides can overcome their personal beliefs and help each other."
"Do you think the Queen Mother will agree to your plan? I mean, if it weakens her position and puts her at an even greater risk from the nobility…"

"The alternative is that the Killiks win," Jacen said tonelessly. "And all the status and who's right and wrong won't mean a thing. We need her ships to keep the eradication of Killiks on compromised planets a 'Hapan' affair. It would look just as bad to anyone else if the Jedi Order and Galactic Alliance vessels fired on Hapan planets."
"So…what are you going to give her in return for her fleet?" Nelani looked at her master nervously. "Even if you two are well…lovers, the Royal Fleet is kind of a big thing to be asking for."
Jacen inadvertently let a small strand of shame through his barriers. "If we do this, the Heritage Council and those who follow them will most likely be slaughtered. That will essentially eliminate most of the Queen Mother's enemies in her court. Those left will be too isolated or frightened to do anything else. I'm hoping that security I can give her, I can give to our daughter, will be enough."
"You'd let them be massacred?" Nelani whispered in horror. "Master, they're being controlled by the Killiks. You can't just…"
"What other way is there?" Jacen hissed in a low voice. "If the Heritage Council emerges from this unscathed, the threat to Tenel Ka and Allana will still be there. They'll just plot and plot until one day they might finally get lucky. You read the briefing; the Killiks only enhance feelings that are already present. The Heritage Council would have plotted to overthrow the Queen Mother even without the Killiks interfering. The only good thing about the Killiks is that they forced all the enemies of Queen Mother out into the open. The greatest weakness of Hapes has been its court intrigue…"
"And what?" Nelani challenged. "The greatest solution you can come up with is to massacre everyone who disagrees with the Queen Mother's rule? To have Hapes ruled by one voice, one opinion? Master, I *know* you. Take a step back, a deep breath. Do you seriously think Tenel Ka will go for what you're offering? That she'll jump at the chance to purge the Hapan courts of every last voice of dissent? Look in the mirror. Is that the type of person you want as Allana's dad?"
Jacen saw his reflection in the porthole of his office, unable to meet his reflection's accusatory gaze. As he took the ordered deep breath, Vergere's lessons once again came to him.
This is exactly why she told him his feelings for Tenel Ka would interfere. As the Force helped him gain an emotional balance, he smiled faintly at his apprentice. Nelani, who had tensed up after her explosion, let out a long breath as well and smiled back weakly. Casting about for a solution, he remembered something he had heard. "If I recall correctly, the G.A. Intelligence had developed some type of serum for the Joiners they uncovered in the Denon undercity."

"Seha told me about how they dosed Raxi and Siare after the two got all bug-eyed," Nelani answered. "According to Master Jusik, the serum acts as some type of neural inhibitor that cancels out the bioelectrical receptors sensitive to the Killik frequencies. Or something like that, I'm a historian not a doctor."
"Think we can get a copy of his analysis and synthesize it? If we can convert it into an aerosol we can use the Yuuzhan Vong shaping clusters to spread it across the afflicted planets."
"I'll get right on it," Nelani saluted. "And thanks, master."
"I should be the one thanking you," Jacen bowed gratefully. "You'll make a fine Jedi, Nelani. Probably even better than me."
"I have a good teacher." Nelani returned and then left the room.
With the door shut behind him, leaving him alone to his thoughts, Jacen felt his hand curl into a fist. With a harsh exhale, he brought his fist down against the nearest wall, trying to vent all his worry and frustration into the single action. It helped, just barely. He could only hope that Tenel Ka would trust him with not just her life, and that of their daughter, but of the billions of lives she reigned over.
]-)-II-(-[
In the many times he had visited Hapes since his return from his four-year adventure sight-seeing the different Force groups in the galaxy, this was the first time he dreaded it. Not that he wasn't eager to hold his daughter again or embrace a certain Queen Mother; but when he normally came to Hapes, it was to get away from the draining politics on Denon. Not to bring those draining politics to the reclusive planet.
"Emerging from hyperspace now," the bridge officer called out, the tunnel of blue light falling away. In its place, the vibrant browns, greens, and whites of the capital of the Consortium grew rapidly. Hapes still looked as Jacen remembered it, which wasn't making anything any easier. "Hold position."
"Hapan Royal Navy ships moving to greet us," another sensor operator reported. "Receiving hail from a Hapan Battle Dragon, the *Dragon Queen.*"
"Put it through."
"*Galactic Alliance forces, this is Ducha Astarta commander of her Majesty's Hapan Home Fleet. Your presence has been expected and is more than welcome."*
"Ducha Astarta," Jacen inclined his head politely. He immediately recognized Isolder's former bodyguard, who had apparently been promoted to fleet commander. "Thank you for the warm welcome, but we did not come here as representatives of the Galactic Alliance. We are merely friends of the rightful Hapan Queen wishing to see that no

harm comes to her. The taskforce is being spearheaded by the Jedi Order, and does not have any senatorial backing."
"*Forgive me, I assumed that with your presence, the Galactic Alliance Senate decided that enough was enough. Are they still tied up in procedure and pointless bickering?"*
"Something like that," Jacen said mildly. "Do I have permission to approach Hapes and land?"
"*Granted, Jedi Solo. I would like to offer you a word of warning, however. Signal Intelligence has intercepted communications from the Heritage Council and we believe that an assault on Hapes is eminent. If you could cede control of your taskforce to my command, I will ensure that they are put to good use."*
"You can liaise with my apprentice, Jedi Nelani Dinn, for those matters," Jacen gestured. "She is more than capable and is a very quick learner."
"I do my best, master," a flushed Nelani replied in turn. "Ducha Astarta, I look forward to working with you."
"*Likewise, Jedi Dinn. Jedi Solo, the Queen Mother is eager to meet you. Best not keep her waiting."*
Jacen smiled faintly. "Understood, ma'am. I'll be departing in a shuttle with several delegates from worlds interested in allying with the Queen Mother's Hapan Consortium. My fleet is yours to command."
The transmission ended.
"I'll be okay up here, master," Nelani said brightly. "Go hug your daughter and the Queen Mother already."
"Thanks Nelani," Jacen laughed softly. "I wasn't exaggerating when I told Astarta you're more than capable. But if you do need anything, I'm just a comm-call away."
"I'll let the delegates know you're preparing to depart. Good luck and may the Force be with you."
A turbolift and a few walkways later and Jacen was entering the hangar bay of the *Anja Gallandro* with his emotions hidden from everyone.
"Lowie," Jacen acknowledged his Wookie friend, clapping his hand on one of Lowbacca's hairy shoulders. "Are you sure Kashyyyk wants to get involved in this?"
"[Senator Triebakk gave me permission to speak on behalf of the Wookies,]" Lowbacca growled solemnly. "[If you believe this path is the best choice for the galaxy, we'll support you.]"
"Thank you," Jacen murmured.
"[I am not entirely selfless, Jacen. Kashyyyk would benefit greatly from an alliance with Hapes,]" Lowbacca said, injecting a small bit of mirth into his growls and woofs. "[Hapes has one of the galaxy's larger fleets.

Fleets need upkeep and retrofitting, technological advancements, and the like. That's more work for my people, and a chance to deal with tech that isn't widely available in the galactic market. In addition, Hapans like rare, pretty, and dangerous things, the forests of Kashyyyk is full of them. Best of all, they have no desire to conquer or exploit our planet. There is very little reason not to ally with the government now led by one of our oldest friends.]"

Jacen just smirked and nodded. "Apart from the war and political chaos, they'll make swell allies."

"And that is why we follow you, spawn of the *Mal'ary'ush*," a guttural voice called out.

"Basbakhan," Jacen acknowledged his mother's former Noghri bodyguard. "Ready to give the people of Hapes their first look at Noghri shocktroops?"

Basbakhan's grin was all teeth. "We have sharpened our claws in hopes of battle. My men and I are eager to defend your clan from whatever is stupid enough to menace it."

"You know," a third delegate, a blue-skinned middle-aged woman named Iona Wince, spoke up. "A week ago, if someone told me I'd be traveling in a yellow-painted Star Destroyer with Wookies, Noghri, Barabel, and ambassadors from Contruum, for the purposes of allying with a reclusive consortium of planets on the verge of a civil war backed by Corellia, I would have thought you were trying to put one over on me."

"Toss in Wroonian, and I would agree," the human Contruum ambassador laughed. "Who would have thought Saleucami would be interested in this little party as well."

"Our sector was ravaged by the Vong during the war, we need Hapan resources to rebuild," Iona, from the Outer Rim world of Saleucami, shrugged; following Jacen, Lowie, and several others into the awaiting shuttle. "We might not have any ships like you people of Contruum. But because the Vong ignored our forests, our botanical and medicinal fields are still going strong. What about you? Isn't Contruum stubbornly independent and loyal to the Galactic Alliance? You'd be the last people I'd have thought to involve themselves in this mess."

"With the Galactic Alliance in the state that it is, the Imps growing stronger every year, Eriadu and the Core worlds siding with Corellia, and Roche and several of our Perlemian Trade Route partners falling into Mandalore's sphere of influence, we can see the writing on the wall. We either join up with other worlds, or risk being absorbed against our will. Hapes has a fleet, we have a fleet, and together it

should keep Corellian's territorial expansions at bay. Of course it wouldn't have been possible if it wasn't for the Jedi Order."
"To tell you all the truth, my brother and I didn't go recruit your worlds for 'Jedi' reasons," Jacen admitted.
"With all due respect, we don't really care," the Wroonian representative said dismissively. "I don't know about you, Senator Solo, but the rest of the galaxy rarely bothers with your 'Jedi way' of doing things. The Wookies are in it for the commerce. Saleucami is in it for the resources Hapes has available. Contruum wants Hapan ships to back theirs. The Noghri are here to kill whatever you need killing. The others here are probably a mix of those. You didn't recruit our planets for Jedi reasons, and we're not here for Jedi reasons. All I know is that if the Queen Mother approves the treaties between my world and hers, both sides will benefit. As great as it would be if the entire galaxy sat around a cozy campfire holding hands and singing songs, that peace you Jedi want has always been just wishful thinking."
"Maybe," Jacen answered neutrally.
"Survival doez make people make decisionz they might not have otherwize made." Tesar offered. "We believe we are right when we say that these alliances would not have been possible if the galaxy waz not in itz current state. Even the Jedi circumventing Galactic Alliance policy iz not something that would have been seen two yearz ago."
"True," Iona replied with a respectful tilt of her head. "If the Galactic Alliance had actually followed through with the funding of the restoration of our world, we wouldn't have had to seek out other partners. We were on the verge of giving our resources to Corellia in exchange for their help when you Jedi called. With Hapes, at least we know we'll still stay in charge of our own affairs. The same couldn't be said with Corellia in control of Saleucami."
"And Contruum wouldn't even need to consider this treaty if the galaxy had remained stable after the war," the Contruum ambassador agreed. "We all learned from the Vong War that you can't make it alone in this galaxy. Now all it comes down to is which of the sides will weather the coming storm better than the other."
"Hopefully that will be our side," Jacen said. "Otherwise, everything we're doing now will have been for nothing."
]-)-III-(-[
Despite the all-out assassination attempt barely a week earlier, the ceremony-happy Hapans were more than willing to roll out the royal-blue carpet and golden banners for the incoming delegates. The Royal Band played a rousing tune, gleaming *Miy'til* fighters in all their chrome glory flashed like comets in the bright sunlight. A line of

nobility stood on either side of the gold-fringed azure carpet, dressed up in their finest outfits despite the baking heat of the Hapan sun. And waiting at the opposite end of the carpet was none other than the Queen Mother herself, flanked by both Gadell Vessau and Moreem Espara.

The shuttle carrying the various delegates landed, small puffs of steam leaving it as the ramp descended. Though many of the nobles had fought in the Yuuzhan Vong War, had heard of the other species that inhabited the greater galaxy, the delegation that arrived was thus far the most eclectic group of non-human aliens in one place that the gathered crowd had seen. They openly gawked at Iona's blue-hued skin, stared in amazement at Lowbacca's towering figure, blinked at the Gand Findsmen that had accompanied the group, and were otherwise stunned into silence at the two-dozen member delegation that Jacen had brought with him. It was one thing to know that they weren't alone in the galaxy, it was an entirely other thing all together to see it for yourself.

Jacen was last to emerge from the shuttle, following the delegates as they all approached the Queen Mother and bowed low. Each delegate murmured words of respect, and the Queen Mother inclined her head regally, no outward emotion visible. As Jacen approached the Queen Mother, he did his best not to smile, or be worried. Apparently things had degraded on Hapes to the point where her security detail insisted she use a body-double, and that she had agreed. With the rest of the delegation now waiting patiently in a group off to the side, Jacen approached and bowed low.

"Queen Mother of the Hapan Consortium, on behalf of the Jedi Order, I wish to present the delegates of many worlds that wish an alliance with your great peoples."

In a fair imitation of Tenel Ka, Trista tilted her head a fraction. "Thank you, my friend. We are sure that all of Hapes will benefit from this gift the Jedi Order has brought to us. The galaxy can indeed be a lonely and scary place without any friends."

Jacen approached and took Trista's hand in his, marveling at how the attendants managed to pin the royal robes of Her Majesty in such a way as to hide the arm she had 'lost'. Feeling the eyes of everyone else on him, he respectfully kissed Trista's hand and smiled the famed grin he inherited from his father. Pretty much everyone knew of his relationship to Tenel Ka, and for the ruse to remain convincing some amount of acting was needed. "Have you been well, my love?"

"As well as one can expect. You have been missed...Jacen. As have you, friend Lowie and Tesar" Trista replied without missing a beat,

looking past Jacen's shoulders. She then turned to address the delegates. "We would like to welcome you to Hapes with a feast. Please, allow our attendants to show you to your quarters and once you have freshened up, meet us back in the dining hall. Should you need anything, you need only ask."
"You are kind and beautiful, Queen Mother," one of the delegates replied humbly.
"If you will excuse us, the Queen Mother wishes to catch up with her dearest friend before the meal. We will be able to talk over dinner."
"Of course," the ambassador from Contruum said congenially.
Trista gestured, and a small army of attendants seemed to come out of nowhere, each taking a delegate and their luggage into the guest wing of the palace. Most of the nobles joined up with the crowd, introductions and initial conversation filling the air like everyone had just arrived at a conference center.
"Having fun playing Queen?" Jacen modulated his voice so that only Trista would be able to hear.
"No," Tenel Ka's cousin replied flatly. "Why anyone would want to murder the sitting regent and take her place is so far beyond me I have stopped trying to understand it. Can you believe that some factions of the nobility still desire Taryn and I to launch a coup and betray our cousin?"
"You're not even enjoying it a little bit?" Jacen pressed, being on Hapes always seemed to lift his spirits regardless of the political threats.
"Maybe a little," Trista finally admitted. She glanced over to her side. "Captain Espara, we appreciate your diligence and dedication to the throne. We would now request that you and Major Vessau check in with the kitchen staff to ensure the dinner is going as scheduled. We will be fine with Jedi Knight Solo here. Oh, and if you could bring him a small snack as well, politics does create an appetite."
"As you command, *ereneda*," Moreem replied, saluting sharply. Being out in the open, she couldn't show a single iota of disrespect.
Trista's face remained impassive, but Jacen could feel her grinning on the inside.
"Being a Queen Mother does have its benefits," Jacen prompted.
"Indeed." Trista muttered under her breath. They began following the last of the nobles back into the palace, Jacen's hand holding Trista's for show.
"You do look a lot like her, you know."
"Thank you, she is an amazing woman."
"She is."

A few seconds lapsed in silence. Jacen had always had an amiable relationship with the Zel twins. Something that had improved after that kiss he had given Tenel Ka on Zonama Sekot all those years ago. They were comrades-in-arms of a sort, just as dedicated to Tenel Ka's safety and happiness as he was. They saw Tenel Ka as an older-sister figure, a mentor and someone to aspire to be. They saw him as the token male who made the Queen Mother happy, and that was really all that mattered.
"How's Taryn?"
"She was…injured…when the attempt to subdue Jedi Knight Zekk was undertaken," Trista replied, choosing her words carefully.
"I made contact with Zekk using the Jedi Meld," Jacen said with concern. "He seemed okay at the end."
"Mentally I suppose," Trista allowed, albeit not as enthusiastically. "Jedi Knight Mallie Marek was effective in neutralizing the threat…"
"But…."
Trista exhaled slowly. "Jedi are capable of viewing the memories of another?"
"Just think about what happened," Jacen nodded.
Trista's gray eyes flicked upwards, and she held his gaze.
Jacen released a breath of his own and gently entered her mind.
]-)-IV-(-[
"Look, there's Jedi Knight Marek!" Taryn yelled, ducking back below cover as a volley of lasers cut through the air above them. "Maybe she can back us up….never mind."
Trista turned her head and saw the blond-haired Jedi rush through the hallway with a grim expression on her face and a comlink held in one hand.
"*Do you think you can locate Jedi Knight Zekk?*" Came the Queen Mother's voice, audible over the din of blaster fights all over the palace.
Trista didn't even need to be Taryn's twin to know where her sister was heading. The moment Mallie replied with 'I'm heading there right now' Taryn had taken off at lightspeed. Not that Trista was too far behind. She too was worried for Zekk and was all for acts of life-endangering recklessness to find out the truth about what had happened on Relephon.
Mallie looked to the two of them as they fell in stride on either side of her. Both Trista and Taryn heard the full extent of Tenel Ka's orders and stared expectantly at the blond Jedi.

Rolling her eyes, Mallie held the comlink up again. "I'll take care of it. Hope you don't mind, but I recruited two of your Royal Guard. I figured I might need some back up."
"Which two?"
"Taryn and Trista."
There was a moment's pause. "*May the Force be with you.*"
"And not with the bastard orchestrating this entire thing," Mallie finished. "I'll contact you when I have results. Marek, out."
"Where are we going?" Taryn said tersely, the trio setting off again.
"One of the towers," Mallie answered in clipped, measured tones that matched the steady footfalls of her booted feet. "One thing the two of you have to be aware of, however. The Zekk that's up there is *not* the Zekk you know."
"What do you mean?" Taryn said, drawing her blaster and absently taking out an assassin that had just rounded the corner in front of them.
"I'm not sure how much you know about his past, or the Force, but there's a side of Zekk very few people alive has seen," Mallie replied, her voice as wooden as her normally gentle face.
"He admitted he was a dark Jedi once," Taryn offered.
"That's a simplification of things," Mallie shrugged. "Look, the Force isn't just light-side, dark-side. It isn't bad against good, or right against wrong. There's aspects of those things in everything *anyone* does in their everyday lives. But bad things can be done for a good reason, just as good things can be done to make bad things happen. Zekk's brush with the dark side actually skirted along the gray area most Jedi ignore. After all, he was redeemed pretty much instantly and was too young then to understand the full consequences of his actions. There's a reason why you don't see teenage Sith running around, just emotionally disturbed teenagers with powers they're only beginning to understand."
"So what does this have to do with Zekk?"
"Zekk and myself actually," Mallie continued. "We're considered 'light side' Jedi due to our choices and abhorrence to the suffering and injustices around us. But we both have a side we keep locked away. Why? Because that part of us is dangerous if we use it the wrong way. Whatever has control of Zekk, however, stripped away those inhibitions. I just want the two of you to prepare yourself for the worst."
"And that would be?"
"Zekk is currently using a Force technique which demoralizes the Royal Guard and emboldens the assassins. I'm not sure where he learned it

from, but it has to be stopped. If we can't subdue him, we'll have to kill him," Mallie replied flatly, stunning the two red-heads.
"Kill him," Trista repeated, unsure whether she had heard it correctly.
"Yes," Mallie's voice was emotionless as she continued up a flight of stairs. "Otherwise the assassins will kill more than the Queen Mother can afford to lose. Zekk in his right mind wouldn't want that to happen."
Trista and Taryn exchanged silent looks, communicating paragraphs of arguments in the span of a few seconds. After a moment, a similar emotionless mask fell over Taryn's face. "Fine, but if it comes down to it, let me be the one that pulls the trigger."
Mallie regarded the younger woman evenly. "*If* it comes down to it. It might not."
They continued up the flights of stairs to the upper most point of the Fountain Palace, emerging out into an open-aired pavilion ringed by a dozen thick columns carved out of black Hapan basalt and roofed by a domed ceiling. The sounds of battle seemed so faint from where they were, but the fight was most definitely ongoing. When they arrived at their destination, they immediately saw who they had been looking for. Seated in the center of the room was Zekk.
But Mallie had been right. It was not the Zekk they knew. Wearing only a set of trousers made of some type of carapace material, the Jedi Knight was facing them as they climbed the last of the stairs. Yellow eyes remained open as Zekk stared out at some unseen image, the whites reddened unnaturally. Blue veins lined his face, hands, bare chest, and ankles and feet, his skin several shades darker than usual. And placed in front of him was the lightsaber Taryn had helped him construct over a week ago.
"Zekk!" Taryn yelled.
Mallie held out an arm and kept Taryn from rushing to the Jedi. "Stay back."
"But…" Taryn trailed off.
Zekk was rising to his feet, his gaze focusing on them and his eyes becoming all black. "You should not keep interfering, Mallie Marek."
"Bad habit of mine," Mallie quipped, her body ramrod stiff. "Would asking you to stop the Battle Meditation work? You're getting a lot of the Queen Mother's guards killed."
"They must die," Zekk replied in a chillingly emotionless voice. "They represent the light. They must be extinguished or the silver-eyed sleeper will awaken."
"Well, that solves things," Mallie said flatly. "Now you sound like Taryn and Trista did back over on Denon. Same puppet master I guess."

"You should not have come here," Zekk held out both hands.
A torrent of purple lightning arched out from Zekk's hands streaking across the short distance towards the blond Jedi.
Taryn and Trista leaped back in shock, but Mallie surprised them even further by unleashing her own brand of dark blue lightning. The two currents met mid way, crackling and ionizing the air in a flashy show of deadly energy.
"You're not the only one who's learned how to channel their darker emotions," Mallie replied tonelessly, effortlessly keeping up with the electrical barrage. The blue and purple light flared and crackled, casting the two combatants in a bright, flickering light. "You showed me once, remember? Told me that your fear of the dark side allowed it to fester within. Just like my hatred of all the injustices in this blaster galaxy gives me a similar strength. So what's stronger, my hate or your fear?"
At what seemed like timed intervals to Taryn and Trista's eyes, the purple lightning would advance and retreat away and towards its caster. Both Zekk and Mallie held their ground, hands extended as their negative emotions continued to manifest themselves in the deadly electrical display. The air quickly filled with the smell of ozone, becoming dry and still. Violent hisses and popping noises accompanied the incessant streams of lightning, the only sound in the deathly quiet pavilion.
Then all at once, Zekk appeared to get a boost of power from some unseen force. The purple lightning swallowed the blue whole, crackling down Mallie's arms and sending the woman flying backwards into one of the pillars with a sickening crunch.
"Zekk, no!" Taryn quickly interposed herself between Zekk and the injured Jedi, blaster raised.
Zekk stared at Taryn for a long moment, then made a hand gesture. In a split second, Taryn let out a howl of pain as her outstretched arm was suddenly bent in several angles where there were no joints.
Trista drew her own blaster and fired several times, but Zekk was already a blur of motion. An open hand strike caught Trista in her solar plexus, and the Force-assisted blow sent her crumbling to the ground gasping for air. Another gesture, and suddenly the still crippled Taryn was lifted up into the air and sent flying into another column.
Images suddenly bombarded Trista's well-ordered mind; her sister dying one way after another, her father's disapproving glare, her failure to do her duty. Emotions she had long locked away were ripped to the forefront of her mind, and Trista stayed where she was, a limp mess.

Mercifully, the onslaught was short. Mallie leaped back to her feet and executed a perfect shoulder tackle on Zekk, driving him backwards. He moved with the momentum, a hand held out and catching his newly air-borne lightsaber.
Mallie kicked off, her own saber flying into her hand and igniting at the same time as Zekk's blade. Molten yellow clashed with Zekk's white-core, red-sheathed blade. The two then began a series of rapid exchanges, their bodies seemingly moving faster than humanly possible.
"He'll burn out first you know," Mallie taunted, her blue eyes a shade darker and movements growing more and more aggressive. "Never did have as much rage as I do."
"You risk the death of a galaxy, resisting as you do," Zekk said in a nonanswer. "We are trying to do what is right, what a true Jedi should do. We are trying to bring true balance to the Force, why do you persist?"
"Well, for one, if anyone sees you right now, they're going to wonder what I ever saw in you. I'll never be able to use the excuse 'he was a pretty face,' ever again," Mallie said, hissing as Zekk's saber scored a brief hit on her arm. "But generally, I'm against the whole death-of-billions makes the galaxy a better place philosophy. Especially if you include your friends in that number."
Zekk made a gesture with one hand, and Mallie was lifted in the air, an invisible force pushing on her torso from all directions.
Startled by the blinding pain, Mallie dropped her saber. After only a second, she began to cough up blood.
"Die now," Zekk said disinterestedly.
"What about Taryn and Trista?" Mallie rasped out, struggling to counter the crushing technique. "Are you going to kill them too?"
Zekk briefly glanced at the twins, then blinked. Mallie had shielded them from their senses and only now could he see them. Both were holding their blasters up and aimed at him. Again Mallie went flying.
Zekk blasted both twins with another barrage of purple lightning, but this time, the twins managed to get off several shots. They were still subjected to a second or two of the life-draining pain, but Zekk fell to the ground nonetheless.
The pavilion seemed oddly quiet after his body hit the ground, filled only with the labored breathing of the three women.
But their ordeal was not quite over.
Hurried footsteps broke the monotony, a squadron of Hapan commandos emerging.

"Major, execute the traitor Jedi before he regains consciousness," a Hapan colonel barked to one of her subordinates. "Get some medics up here too."
Trista, Taryn, and Mallie were in no condition to stop the squad no matter how badly they wanted to. However, just as a commando stood over Zekk's unconscious form with blaster in hand, a silver blade of light shot out of her chest. The rest of the squad quickly brought their weapons to bear, but they stood little chance against the dual lightsaber blades that flew in and out of the columned rooftop. After a tense few seconds, the last of the commandos fell to the ground, very much dead. The two glowing sabers deactivated and flew back into the shadows.
Another few seconds, and the familiar figure of Alema Rar emerged, dropping down from the rooftop and sauntering into the room. Her eyes were completely black, just like Zekk's had been, but her skin seemed more naturally blue than Trista could ever remember seeing. Alema stopped over Zekk's form, a faint smile appearing as she gazed on his face almost affectionately. "Your time with the Kind is done now, Joiner Zekk. The one called Alema made a bargain with us. We will continue our plans, but your ultimate happiness is not with the Kind." Pitiless eyes locked onto a still traumatized Trista. "You will safeguard his happiness. He is a friend of the Kind. We will be most displeased should harm come to him on your watch."
The sudden feeling of a speeder being parked on her limp body caused Trista to cry out and nod fervently. The pressure was released and Alema moved on.
"Mallie Marek," Alema tilted her head to the side, regarding Mallie with an emotionless stare. "We are sparing you only because Alema Rar and Zekk wish it. But should you continue to interfere in our affairs, we will not be as merciful."
"Much appreciated," Mallie gasped out, spitting out a glob of blood. "But no promises."
"We will go now, do not attempt to follow or stop us. There is more at stake than you believe."
"Alema, wait," Taryn managed to rasp, somehow pulling herself up. Alema, however, held out a hand. "Sleep now, Taryn Zel. Now is not the time to fight."
In a split second, Taryn fell back over, completely unconscious.
"Tend to your war," Alema instructed with a gesture, bypassing the fallen Hapans and Jedi and heading down the stairwell. "It is better the flames consume what little fuel there is now, than ignite the built up hatred and jealousy that might exist later."

]-)-V-(-[

The images he had seen in Trista's mind occupied Jacen's thoughts for the remainder of the walk to the Queen Mother's chambers. It was pretty obvious that both Alema and Zekk had become 'Joiners,' under the sway of whoever was controlling the Killik nests in the Hapes Cluster. But it was Lomi's motives voiced through Alema that confused Jacen the most. It almost seemed as if the Killiks thought the chaos and discord they were spreading was a *good* thing. That there was something much worse they were averting by doing so.

The Force wasn't helping him in this matter. Whether the Killiks were stopped or not, all Jacen could see of the future were burning ships, planets, and a dark shadow surrounding everything. The only difference was who those burning ships belonged to. He definitely recognized the Hapan markings of the ships in the 'Killiks-weren't-stopped' timeline; and Chiss ships, and Yuuzhan Vong vessels. If the Killiks were stopped, however, he could see ships from hundreds of different worlds engaged in combat. Remembering his lessons about trying to manipulate the Force, Jacen once again withdrew himself from those endless possibilities. He might be able to affect the future somewhat, but the only thing he could change for sure was the present.

"I'll enter the room with you, but I will leave the back way," Trista said, her first words to him since she had shared her memories. "You will be alone with Her, and your daughter."

"Thank you for the escort," Jacen said courteously. With his mind being snapped back to the present, he became keenly aware of just how anxious he was to hold Tenel Ka and his daughter once more.

Taking a deep breath and wiping his suddenly sweaty hands on his Jedi robes, he gave a curt nod to Trista, who proceeded to push open the elaborate wooden doors to the Queen Mother's chambers. Once they were inside and the doors closed behind them, he didn't even register Trista leaving. The only thing in his sight was the real Queen Mother and the child cradled lovingly in her one arm. The afternoon sun shone through the quartzite skylight, muted yet casting the mother and child in a warm glow.

"Tenel Ka," Jacen whispered, almost awe-struck.

Tenel Ka offered a wan smile, gray eyes glimmering with similar happiness and relief. "Jacen."

Jacen closed the short distance between the doorway and the bed-side rocking chair almost on autopilot, slowing only when he focused on his daughter once more. "Hard to believe it's been nearly three months since I was last here."

"All that matters is that you are here now," Tenel Ka corrected softly, tilting her head back to briefly accept his tender kiss. "We cannot do anything about the events that have already transpired. But we can most definitely try our best to make the future a bit better."
"Definitely." Jacen reached out a timid hand and gently rested it on the top of his daughter's head, feeling the almost downy curls of blondish-red hair in wonderment. "Were the couriers I sent able to get you the message?"
"They were," Tenel Ka sighed. She looked much more tired and older than the twenty-sevenish year old woman she was. "I truly wish there was another way…but I understand the logic of your arguments. Either these traitors are dealt with in our time, or Allana will be forced to deal with them in hers."
"I'm having the scientists I brought along try to come up with some sort of gas that will disable the Joiners without killing them."
"I have a similar project ongoing. Former Jedi Sinsor Khal is leading a team of scientists analyzing samples taken from Zekk and the remains of the assassins. It is our hope that his time can somehow undo the mind control used."
"I'll move my team groundside then. Have them link up with Sinsor's team and combine their efforts. The problem of those wanting to dethrone you will still remain, however. Even without the Killiks, their true intentions have shown through."
"And arresting them en masse is something my grandmother would have done, so that is not an option," Tenel Ka agreed. She gently handed Jacen Allana and stood, gazing out the balcony at the gleaming city of Tenel Ka Chume Dan. "I would need to set up some sort of commission, a place for those dissatisfied to air their grievances in a safe manner, free of consequences and reproach. The Heritage Council represents a fairly large section of Hapan nobility, so the dissatisfaction with my rule will most likely run even deeper."
"If I or the Jedi Order can do anything to help…"
"No. I am sorry," Tenel Ka looked to Jacen, her face softening slightly as she watched him rock their daughter back and forth in his cradled arms. "But this has to be a Hapan endeavor. With the delegates you brought, you and Anakin have taken the first steps in forcing our doors open to the outside galaxy. But Hapes is not yet ready to have our internal affairs and way of life dictated by our galactic relations like so many other worlds are. When I took the throne, I promised my people to be a Hapan first and foremost. Until Hapes is ready for me to be a Jedi, I will have to solve this problem as a Hapan."

"I understand," Jacen nodded tiredly, marveling at the innocent life slumbering against his chest. "It's just…"
"I understand," Tenel Ka whispered, her voice pained. "What you have done, the forces you have brought and the answers you have come up with, they have helped a great deal already, my dearest friend. But…"
"Not all powerful," Jacen quipped with a ghost of a smile.
"Indeed."
Jacen focused back on his daughter, trying to commit to memory the feel of her small body in his arms, her scent, her presence in the Force. With the way the galaxy was going, he had no idea how many chances he would have to do this, to hold and love his daughter, and he wasn't taking the moment for granted.
"Do you agree to the plan that I worked out with the Corellians?" Jacen looked back to his lover.
"Unfortunate to the families of those who were killed in the skirmishes, agreeing to pardon the Corellians is the only foreseeable way to prevent more deaths," the red-haired queen relented with a nod. "Provided that Corellia understands that that is as far as my goodwill will go, I agree in theory to the plan. They will withdraw their forces from designated systems, and my ships will go in and eradicate any Killik presence and neutralize the Joiner population. The coalition forces you brought will remain on hand to safeguard the systems loyal to myself and repel any possible Heritage Council/Killik strike. Do we have any idea as to the strength of the Killik forces?"
"If the information the Corellians sent over is any indicator, there are enough Killiks for them to be active on at least two dozen worlds. We're just guessing here, but we believe that the Killiks became active in the Hapan Cluster nearly four years ago. They've had that long to build up their numbers and initiate their plots."
Tenel Ka rubbed at her forehead. "Then let us hope that what is left of the Royal Navy is up to the task. As things stand, with the Heritage Council opposing me, the Royal Navy is at less than two-thirds strength. Hapes relies on the nobility to fund ships, relies on their people to crew them. Even if we are victorious in this endeavor, Hapes will not be a significant military force for many years after. The worst part is, is that this is taking into account the best possible outcome. It is highly likely we'll be ceding our portion of Hutt Space to the Bothans due to our inability to police and control that region of space from afar."
"Hopefully the other treaties that will be made can make up for that."
"That is the only positive news," Tenel Ka said. She let her hand drop and looked to her lover. "I've already given orders to my fleets to begin

assembling at key locations. At the moment, I'm waiting for a Heritage Council fleet attack on Hapes to ensure that their systems have the fewest number of ships protecting them. I'll be relying on your forces, and that of the Bothans, to keep my people safe."
"How many worlds do you intend to hit?"
"As many as I can," Tenel Ka answered succinctly. "I am going to assume that the Killiks will retaliate the moment they realize we know where they are. Given that they were able to reach Hapan space to begin with, I am also assuming that they have a sizable fleet somewhere in the Consortium. With their current numbers, the Royal Navy can launch six large-scale simultaneous attacks, so I have chosen worlds belonging to the Heritage Council houses Chell, Galney, Gheer, Zir-dan, and Thane."
"Not AlGray or Aros?" Jacen raised an eyebrow.
At that, Tenel Ka smiled enigmatically. "I am not so helpless and in the dark as you might think, my friend. Ducha Asin'vi Aros may be a part of the Heritage Council, but she is also a Royal Intelligence agent. It was her information that allowed me to get Heritage Council backing for my initial alliance with the Bothans and identify houses falling into their sphere of influence. Recently I had worried that Asin'vi had betrayed me, but it is more likely that the Killiks compromised her. Her daughter, after all, is in the same squad as Taryn and Trista and remains adamant of her house's loyalty to the royal family. Corellian Intelligence believes that her homeworld is one of three major Killik centers of operation, so I will be leading the assault on that world personally."
"And AlGray?"
"They are still open supporters of the royal family," Tenel Ka replied wanly. "I cannot launch an attack on their home system without my other allies becoming worried that I have become a tyrannical ruler bent on staying in power."
Jacen chuckled softly. "Nah, you're just a mildly benevolent ruler bent on staying in power."
"I could always step down." Tenel Ka's words were said without emotion, and Jacen blinked when he realized that she was completely serious about the offer.
"Tiki?"
Tenel Ka removed the diadem she had been wearing and stared at it tiredly. "This crown, these robes, this planet and the sixty-three systems I'm supposed to lead. All of it is between me and the family I wish to have. Between me and you and Allana. A mother should worry about whether she's tied off the swaddling cloth right, and not worry

about where the next assassination attempt on her daughter will come from. A daughter who should have her father in her life but can't because of the burden of duty placed on her mother's shoulders. I have devoted the past nine years of my life trying to help improve the lives of my people, and all I have gotten in return is more enemies envious of my popularity among the common-folk. As Queen Mother I am not allowed to have friends, am not allowed to do a great many things despite being in charge. And after almost a decade, I am tired of it. I can see why my mother stepped down during the war. I suppose I'm fortunate she was able to survive for as long as she had in this environment…" She trailed off, her thoughts continuing loudly through her bond with her lover.

Jacen sat on the edge of the large bed and let the mattress take his weight. Through the Force, he continued to reinforce his bond to both Allana and Tenel Ka. "What would you have me do, my love?"

Gray eyes shimmering, Tenel Ka held his tender gaze. She reached out with her lone hand and rested the palm against his cheek, feeling the coarse whiskers beneath. "You have but to ask, Jacen. Ask me to step down. To appoint someone else to take on everything so that we can truly be a family. Ask me to be at your side once more, trade my silk robes for Rancor leather, my crown for the lightsaber. No more politics, treaties, plots and intrigue. Just us, Allana, your family, the Force. Ask me."

Jacen was unable to look away as he covered her hand with one of his, feeling his own eyes water at her request. It was something he wanted more than anything, but again couldn't have because of everything. She knew he could never ask, just as he knew she could never truly give up her position with things in the state they were.

"Someday, Tiki," Jacen whispered hoarsely, closing his eyes so he did not have to see the resigned pain fill his love's eyes. "Someday, I'll ask that. I promise."

"Then I will eagerly await such a day," Tenel Ka whispered back, letting her hand slip away to caress their sleeping daughter.

Jacen shifted, pulling Tenel Ka to him, and the trio reclined back into her bed. Tenel Ka simply rested her head in the crook of his arm, reaching out her lone hand to hug both him and their child. As he held his family, Jacen reflected on how ironic their situation was. Here they were, a queen and a Jedi senator, capable of making decisions that affected the lives of billions of people. Yet, when it came to their own lives and the life they wanted to live, they were completely powerless. While he and Tenel Ka were passing laws and signing treaties to ensure that families could live happy, prosperous lives, the effort that

went into such signings ensured that the two of them were denied a similar happy life.
Was it selfish of him to want to go back to his original plan, wipe out all the Heritage Council members so that Tenel Ka would be less stressed? So that their daughter wouldn't have to deal with the same heartache when she came of age and fell in love. He so wished he could just wave a hand, right the wrongs, and then return to his family by supper. Yet, that was not to be.
He could feel Tenel Ka doze off against him, the stress of her position finally bleeding away as she used their bond to recuperate. He could feel Allana's innocent presence in the Force, delighted that he was holding her once more. He closed his own eyes, trying to keep his negative emotions from the two of them.
Evidently he was as successful as Anakin was when it came to hiding his distress.
Simultaneously, both Allana's and Tenel Ka's Force presences converged on his own, washing away the distress and tension with soothing waves of love and compassion. It was only then that Jacen finally exhaled and let the worries temporarily disappear. He would have plenty of time to fret over an imminent invasion of mind-controlling bugs later.
Now, now was time for his family.
Tightening his grip on Allana and Tenel Ka, Jacen felt himself drift off with the two of them, receiving a temporary reprieve from the demands of a galaxy.
]-)-Chapter End-(-[

Zekk
]-)-I-(-[
Taryn worried her lower lip as she gazed out through the ceiling-high palace window at one of the surrounding gardens. Her arm in a sling—the attack had overwhelmed medical facilities so only life-threatening injuries warranted bacta treatment—the red-haired warrior watched with a hawk-like glare as Mallie Marek sat down on a stone bench next to Zekk. They appeared to talk for a bit, Zekk relaxing in the presence of the blond-haired Jedi from Corulag and smiling faintly in her direction.
Taryn's sharp gray eyes darkened as Mallie reached up to caress the side of Zekk's face.
Her good fist clenched when Mallie planted a light kiss on Zekk's lips.

She continued to watch as Mallie then leaned back and settled her head against Zekk's shoulder, his arm draped lightly over her shoulders. And Taryn's fist uncurled as she let out a soft sigh.
The two were obviously taking comfort from the other and enjoying the Hapan sunlight.
Almost plaintively, Taryn placed her good hand against the cool glass of the window, watching the two below with undisguised envy and insecurity. She had *thought* she had figured out Zekk's feelings for her, that he cared for her the same way she did for him but wasn't ready to say it yet. But watching him and Mallie, they seemed like such a natural couple, not to mention that Force-bond the two Jedi had. Something Taryn knew she could never hope to match.
Zekk had tried to avoid Mallie, Taryn, and Trista in the days since the attack, but Mallie always seemed to know where to find him. Always knew when to back off or when he needed company.
Taryn swallowed the lump in her throat and let her arm drop, watching as Mallie whispered something to Zekk. In Taryn's mind, Zekk chuckled and shook his head, giving Mallie a playful shoulder nudge.
The lump in her throat grew. How could she, a simple Hapan commando, hope to compete against a Jedi who could throw lightning about and face down Zekk at his worst, knowing full well she might have to kill him? It was times like this when Taryn wished her mother was alive, or her father even. Someone she could go to make sense of the complicated feelings that had her heart thumping loudly in her chest and her stomach twisted in knots.
Was it natural to have romantic feelings for a man that had shattered the bones in your arm and tossed you about like a rag-doll? Probably not. But then again, to Taryn, that wasn't the Zekk she knew. And that's where she was having a problem. Mallie had obviously accepted that darker part of Zekk, the side Taryn hadn't even realized existed. If both the Zekk she knew, and the Zekk she saw that night were part of the same person…did she truly know Zekk at all?
"Corporal Ta~ryn Zel."
Taryn looked up to see her commanding officer standing right next to her. When Moreem had arrived, Taryn didn't have the slightest clue.
"Sorry, sir. I'll be ready for duty in another da…" Taryn stopped when Moreem waved her off.
"Corporal Zel, just what are you doing up here, gazing out the window like a love-struck school girl?"
Taryn blinked wildly, color flooding her cheeks. "Just…admiring the view outside, sir."
"Would not the view outside be better if you were actually out there?"

"It would…" Taryn said, her eyes rooted to a spot just above Moreem's head.
"Then you should probably go out there to…enjoy the view. Your sister has commented about how unusually sullen you've become these past few days. Maybe some fresh air will help."
"Yes, sir."
"And Corporal Zel."
"Yes?"
"Before you go, a question if I may. What is your present opinion of the state of relations between Corulag and Hapes?"
The question caused Taryn's eyes to dart to her superior officer in surprised embarrassment. "Sir?"
"I am to brief the Queen Mother shortly," Moreem continued professionally. "Corulag has offered to help Hapes navigate the complexities of inter-galactic trade in exchange for duty-free trade and other concessions. While on one hand, there is some logic to their proposal—Corulag has far more experience with the galactic trade networks and is tied deeply to several trade organizations—there are many weaknesses as well. Should Hapes give in to Corulag just because Corulag has more experience and stronger connections to the galaxy? Or should we strive to put ourselves on equal footing to avoid giving Corulag control of what we want?"
Taryn's eyes darted back out the window for a fraction of a second. She then straightened. "We are Hapan, sir. Just because we are at a disadvantage now, does not mean it will always be so. We should push for fairer terms so that the galaxy can see Hapes as her own entity and not subordinate to Corulag."
"I have reached a similar conclusion," Moreem raised an eyebrow and eyed Taryn. "Thank you for confirming my beliefs."
"And thank you, sir," Taryn bit her lower lip, a small amount of pink still staining her cheeks.
"For?"
"For being an excellent commanding officer," Taryn replied. "Now if you'll excuse me. I need to do my part in equalizing Hapan-Corulag relations."
Taryn didn't even bother to wait for Moreem's dismissal. She rotated on her heels and promptly took off down the hallway at a brisk walk. Even Moreem's parting 'Good luck, corporal,' barely registered as Taryn began to mentally review the many arguments why she would be better for Zekk than a Jedi who knew him *really* well. Her main reason, 'because I just am,' strengthened her resolve with every passing second.

Her footfalls echoed down several flights of stairs, through another few hallways and doorways, before she finally passed into the bright sunshine and crisp morning air. The grass quivered as she walked past, purpose in her every step. Again she recited exactly what she was going to say to Ms. Corulag.
It wasn't that she was over her reservations, but she at least wanted to keep her options open.
Something that wouldn't happen if Mallie was able to convince Zekk to leave Hapes.
All thoughts were brought to a halt though, when Taryn saw the bench with Mallie and Zekk on it. Both Jedi were looking at her with eyebrows arched in amusement. Mallie was even glancing at a watch, looking as if she was in deep thought.
"Told you, Zekk," Mallie said calmly. "Less than ten minutes."
"You had Trista talk with Moreem, that was cheating," Zekk retorted, pulling the comlink out of Mallie's hand.
"'Tis not," Mallie said playfully. "Trista was the one who agreed to it. Said something about being tired of her not-sister."
Taryn remain rooted in her spot, her arguments and reasoning evaporating.
"Hey, Taryn," Mallie smiled, getting to her feet and readjusting her blond pony-tail. "Just keeping Zekk company, making sure he doesn't run off before the two of you can talk. You mind taking my space? My flight back home leaves in an hour, so I should go down to the spaceport. Got a couple of treaties I need Corulag's new senate to ratify. Even if they are a bunch of thugs in suits now."
Taryn nodded mutely.
"Great. You've got a nice planet here. Don't worry, Jacen, Zekk and the Queen Mother are going to keep it that way. See you around the galaxy Zekk. Stay away from mind-controlling bugs?"
"Got it," Zekk chuckled ruefully.
Mallie returned his smile, letting her fingers gently brush against one of his cheeks before turning and walking away.
Taryn hesitantly filled the vacuum, her feet coasting her forward as her mind tried to catch up. "Hi," she almost whispered, averting her eyes.
"Hey." Zekk's response was just as timid. Taryn was slightly surprised that she could immediately feel some amount of guilt, guilt she knew wasn't her own.
Taryn took a seat on the far side of the bench, trying to ignore the seemingly uncrossable void she had just created between the two of them. "You doing okay?"

"I've been better." Zekk's eyes darted to the sling that held her left arm. "You?"
"I've been better."
They fell silent again, seemingly unsure what to say. Confusion, hurt, a sense of loss, neither knowing how to fix the situation. In fact, neither really knew what was broken in the first place. It didn't help that Taryn had her own storm of emotions and somehow could sense Zekk's own bewilderment at the same time.
"Nice weather," Zekk commented, grimacing the moment the words left his mouth.
"Very nice," Taryn agreed in the same neutral tone, a corner of her mouth twitching as she fought back a smile.
"Listen, Taryn…"
"Zekk I…"
"We have got to stop doing that," Zekk let out a genuine chuckle.
"Agreed. From now on, I get to speak my mind first. I *am* a member of the Royal Family after all. You're just a man." Taryn injected as much pompous arrogance into her voice as she could.
"Go ahead, Lady Zel," Zekk said with amusement.
Taryn smiled faintly, staring up at the distance clouds. "After waking up in the med-wing, I realized that the you I had built up in my head was still the fairy-tale version my twelve-year old self had built up. Here you were, the heroic Jedi, smiting evil and making the galaxy right again. Course, saving Trista and my life again and again did nothing to get rid of that image."
"I never meant for…"
"Shush, my turn," Taryn whipped her head to Zekk to glare at him, her gleaming red braids following her motion. "As good a friend as you have been to House Zel…to me and Trista…neither Trista nor I ever really had a chance to *know* you. I mean, it wasn't until Relephon that I discovered you were once a dark Jedi. Wasn't until a couple weeks ago that I really understood what dark Jedi was."
"Taryn, if you don't want to be around me…"
"I said shush!" Taryn covered his mouth with one of her hands. Zekk closed his mouth again, and Taryn nodded approvingly. "Now, you have to understand that Trista and I never really received proper instructions on how to court someone. Father was mother's consort long before she decided to officially marry him. The Queen Mother and Jacen were friends from childhood, and it really isn't fair using them as an example. Most Hapan marriages for people of our status are either arranged or of convenience. And being members of the Royal Family, both Trista and I have the added pitfall of someone befriending us to

enhance their own place in our society. Since you came back into our lives, even if it was only a month or two at a time, I…you've just become very important to House Zel…to me."
Taryn's last words were but a whisper, her confidence wavering slightly. Zekk gently gripped her wrist and pulled her hand away from his mouth. "Can I talk now?"
Swallowing nervously, and somewhat red-faced, Taryn blinked once in assent.
"Like you, I don't exactly have someone I can ask about…well…this sort of thing. My relationship with Jaina didn't quite reach where I had hoped it would go. Mallie and I kind of drifted together and bonded over the refugees we were helping out. Ironically, it was also why we drifted apart too. Like you, no parents. All other relationships I know are Jedi ones, and that immediately means 'complicated beyond belief'. So just *what* are you asking, Taryn? Our friendship has become so important to me, surprisingly so, and I don't want to do anything to wreck it."
Taryn looked down at her lap. "I would like to have a chance to get to know you, Jedi Knight Zekk. *Really* know you, the good and the bad. The world you live in is something most people will only know of through holovids and folklore. But I want to know about it firsthand. I know it's a selfish request and I really have no right or place to ask it of…"
This time it was Taryn's turn to be shocked as Zekk pressed a single finger against her lips.
"I would be honored, Lady Zel," Zekk murmured, green eyes holding conflicted gray.
"Good," Taryn whispered hoarsely. A delighted and delirious smile crossed her face. "Good."
Zekk drew back slightly and gestured to her broken arm. "They couldn't spare the bacta?"
"No," Taryn grimaced, shifting her shoulder slightly. "There were over a thousand people wounded in the attack. Bacta was triaged based on severity of injury. I'm told the Queen Mother personally intervened when some of the lesser injured nobles tried to use their authority to jump ahead in line. Don't worry, I'll make a full recovery. Just have to heal the old-fashioned way."
Zekk gestured for her to move closer. She did, searching his face questioningly.
"Trust me?"
Taryn nodded mutely.

Zekk gently removed the sling, cradling her still mending arm in both of his. "How bad was it?"
"I've had worse," Taryn breathed, not wanting him to feel any worse than he was. At the same time, though a part of her registered just how warm his battle-roughened hands felt on her arm.
"Taryn."
"Fine. According to the med-bot, I have seven major fractures, a handful of hairline and microfractures, and possible nerve damage. It's in the past though, Zekk. No sense beating yourself up about it."
"Wasn't why I asked," Zekk remarked softly. "You wanted to learn more about me, here's something else. Do you remember back on Tatooine when you got badly injured?"
"Trista wouldn't let me leave my bed for a full month," Taryn smiled at the memory.
"Well, I sustained your life by using the Force to fix you up," Zekk continued his story.
With Zekk holding her broken arm, Taryn felt a tingling warmth course through her bicep and down to her fingertips.
"Healing with the Force is actually really complicated. Requires innate knowledge of biology so you know exactly what each part of the body can do."
"So you were specializing in being a healer?"
Zekk looked up at Taryn with a half-smile. "Not exactly. Most Jedi know a few basic healing techniques. First aid and how to patch up holes and blaster burns in your own body."
"Putting a skull back together doesn't seem to be too basic."
"Blame my friends," Zekk continued, seemingly drifting back to memories past. "Back during the start of the war, when things weren't going so well, Jaina had started pushing herself harder and harder. She had already lost her wingman, lost Chewbacca, and a few other friends. When the mission to Myrkr came up, a part of me was terrified that she would do something risky and possibly fatal to see to it that the mission succeeded. Of course, I was worried about the wrong Solo. And when Anakin and Tahiri nearly died because Tekli couldn't keep up with the both of them and we had no other healer…that was the final straw. I asked Tekli to teach me techniques I could use to help save the lives of my friends; and at the time, my friends were my only family."
Taryn, who had been so engrossed in his story, didn't even register that he was flexing her arm until he used it to wave her own hand in front of her face. "Zekk!" After her initial exclamation, however, she quickly realized that there was no pain. "You fixed my arm?"

"Not completely," Zekk shrugged. "I wouldn't recommend doing push-ups or anything strenuous on it for the next couple of days, but you should regain full function of it."
"There are definite benefits to having you around," Taryn used her newly repaired hand to affectionately caress his face. "Do you have any other stories of adventure and daring you want to share?"
Zekk hesitated for a moment, as if he were in the midst of a tough decision. Finally, he bowed his head and nodded. "Sure."
"Zekk?"
"Would you like to hear about my time as the Darkest Knight of the Shadow Academy?"
"You don't have to…"
"I know," Zekk breathed out a long, slow breath. "But I've never really let myself think back to those days. Talking with someone who doesn't already have a preconceived notion of the dark side is tough when all your friends are Jedi. You did tell me I should stop running from those days and face it."
Taryn took one of his hands into her own. "Then I'll gladly listen to whatever you wish to say."
"Thank you," Zekk looked to her, a haunted shadow in his eyes. "There are definite benefits to having you around."
"I try my best," Taryn quipped. "Now come on, Darkest Knight, time to fight those nightmares."
"Okay," Zekk's expression was a cross between bemusement and reluctance. "Fine…well…I guess things really started the moment I met the Solos…"

]-)-II-(-[

It seemed slightly insane, to begin courting someone on the eve of one of the greatest battles since the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War. Hapes was on high alert, its ships going through maneuvers, its ground forces drilling almost non-stop throughout the system. There was no mistaking the forces Jacen had brought with him, in their non-Hapan uniforms, non-human appearances, and foreign tongues. Nor was there any missing the heightened security across all the 'high priority targets' on the planet. In clean-rooms and laboratories, scientists led by Galactic Alliance Sanix Fous and Hapan Jedi of the old Order Sinsor Khal were working overtime trying to analyze and learn all they could about the Killiks and the Joining process.
But, recovering from injuries both physical and mental, Taryn and Zekk were left off most of the mandatory training lessons; their only orders were to heal. Given how rare it was for them to actually have time off away from their duties, they both decided to make the most of it.

"Hey Zekk," Taryn waved over the dark-haired Jedi with her newly healed arm, gray eyes bright. It caused Zekk to pause for a moment as he stepped out of the speeder. Not wearing her usual Hapan Royal Guard uniform, or her black leather outfit, Taryn looked decidedly… different… in a simple green sundress and red braids drawn back into a pony-tail.
"Hey yourself," Zekk finally managed, eyebrows rising.
"Off-duty," Taryn shrugged sheepishly, self-consciously tugging at the material of her sundress.
"Not used to seeing you off-duty I guess. Nice," Zekk felt his own cheeks pinken. He paused to appraise the relatively modest cobblestone house behind her. "So this is House Zel's home away from home."
"Compared to some of the others, Mom was what you would call a commoner," Taryn chuckled ruefully, glancing back at the house. At two-stories tall, the natural grays of the rocks that made up the façade glimmered in the morning light. It wasn't a palace by any means, but it was a far cry from a hovel. "But since dad was related to Crown Prince Isolder, she became royal too. Probably why Ta'a Chume hated her. Social climbers in Hapes are kind of common if you haven't realized."
"I have some idea." Zekk offered Taryn his elbow, and she slipped her arm through it. "Remember that awards ceremony for after we stopped the ones who poisoned the Queen Mother?"
Taryn laughed at that. "How could I not? I never saw you more flustered than when Lady Palai came up to you and demanded you be her consort."
"Whatever did happen to her by the way?"
"She's the commerce advisor for her House. Probably sitting on some porch dreaming of unobtainable young men."
Entering the small walkway, Zekk took note of the overgrown weeds in what had probably been well-cared flower beds. "This place looks abandoned."
At that, Taryn looked away slightly and stilled. "Trista and I haven't come back here since dad died. We didn't really have a reason to with our quarters in the barracks and our duties…"
"So…"
"This is my first time back in over three years," Taryn shrugged, falling silent. After several long moments she looked back to Zekk and reached out to open the door to the house. The musty scent of a closed up building wafted out, but they entered; floorboards creaking.
"There's a reason why the Zel family home is as far away from Tenel

Ka Chume'dan as possible. From what dad told Trista and I, mom hated the politics of the capital."
"So how did they meet?" Zekk glanced back towards Taryn as he opened a window.
"Dad was with SigTel, on a mission to take down some threats to Ta'a Chume," Taryn recited. From the distant smile on her face, Zekk could tell the story was one she knew by heart. He could almost see twin red-headed girls staying up late at night, begging their father to tell them about their mother one more time. "They had picked up a series of transmission from the conspirators coming from the outskirts of the royal city. So naturally any noble family with residence out there fell under suspicion. Mom had just finished getting her degree in chemical engineering and was going to join her House's efforts to create fast-firing turbolasers for the new-model Battle Dragons. Ta'a Chume had originally given the contract to House Zel with the intention of humiliating them and then giving the contract to one of the more powerful Houses. You see, at the time, House Zel had minimal resources, staffing, and technology. Mom and Grandma Zel, however, turned the tables and began to make headway. Fearing that the technology was about to fall into the hands of the enemy, dad was assigned to 'supervise' House Zel. The rest is Hapan courtship at its finest. He even kept most of the correspondence between mom and him after his assignment was over."
Taryn opened a closet and reached up to the top shelf to pull out a worn-looking box. The slight shimmering over the otherwise wooden exterior was a tell-tale sign that the box was protected from age by a small forcefield. Taryn keyed in a code, and the shimmering died away. With an almost goofy and eager grin, she opened the box and gingerly pulled out a piece of faded paper. Eyes darting shyly up to Zekk, she began to read the letter.
"'*Dear Lady Zel, I hope this letter finds you well. Yes, I will admit that upon meeting you I found you to be very beautiful, but more it was your keen mind that won my attention. Any woman who can outmaneuver my mother is worthy of praise. Though I do hope you and your mother are taking great care, Ta'a Chume's wrath is not a safe thing to incur. I have to once again thank you for spending the time to respond to my letters, they are a joy to read during trying times within the palace. I will not bore you with the details about those trying times, but suffice to say, the political situation in the palace is getting suffocating. Without a female heir, my mother is being forced by the nobility to designate a successor. Fortunately, I don't really have to*

worry about that, being the only son spawned by her second consort, but Kalen and Isolder are being constantly tested.
Personally, I worry about what will come. Kalen is such the opposite to our mother in terms of personality and ideology that it is doubtful she will choose him. I mean, he used to sing Isolder and I to sleep if we had nightmares, and patched up our cuts and scrapes. Something mother should have been doing. And if there is one thing I know about my mother is that if you are no longer of use to her, she'll eliminate you with extreme prejudice. As the product of an affair between mother and another noble, things don't look good for me either. Look, here I am telling you I wouldn't bother you with my troubles, and I'm doing it anyways. My apologies. Like always, your replies are most appreciated, a bright spot in an otherwise tiring day. I am more than honored that you deem me worthy of such attention. Yours truly, Vadik."
"Wow," Zekk smiled, sensing the joy and contentment radiate out from Taryn as she read every syllable.
"I know," Taryn giggled, looking guilty as she put the letter back into the box. "When Trista and I were little, he used to read us both his letters and mom's as bedtime stories. Sometimes it would be Trista or me who reads mom's in reply to his. Kind of a way for us to be a whole family if only for a few moments."
"You know, I can actually see that." Zekk replied fondly, wrapping an arm around her.
Taryn bit her lower lip in thought, her gaze darting to the back door. "Do you want to visit their graves?"
"They're buried here?"
"Ta'a Chume wouldn't let mom be buried in the royal graveyard," Taryn nodded. "But dad wanted to be buried with mom. They're in a small plot out back."
"It would be my honor," Zekk murmured, rubbing her bare arm.
The two exited the house and followed a winding dirt road to a single tree at the top of a hill. Two stone grave-markers, made of the same stone the house was constructed from, stood out from the ground. Holo-images of Taryn and Trista's parents glimmered in the early sunlight, pale blue ghosts above their final resting places. Taryn and Zekk stood in silence in front of these markers, heads bowed in respect.
"Hi mom, dad," Taryn whispered, leaning against Zekk for support. "Sorry it's been a while, duty calls and all that. Look who I brought with me, House Zel's personal Jedi Knight. Trista and I are both in good health, busy protecting our cousin and untangling those threats us royals have to live with. After years of relative peace, we're at war

again, no surprise right? But don't worry, Trista, Zekk, and I will make it through it, just like we did the last one. I hope…I hope you're at peace. You raised Trista and I right, so we'll be okay. Zekk, you want to say something to them?"
He nodded, stepping forwards and closing his eyes. "Lady Zel, Lord Zel, you definitely have two amazing daughters. Their friendship means worlds to me and I'll do my best to have their backs when they need me to. Like Taryn said, we'll make it through this war. I only wish that I had the time to know the two of you better."
Taryn fondly wrapped her arms around one of his again, hugging it to her as her gray eyes focused on the holograms of her parents' smiling faces.
After several long minutes, Taryn looked back to Zekk, her eyes glimmering. "Zekk."
"Yeah?"
"Do…do non-Jedi join the Force too?"
"The Force is in every living thing," Zekk answered with a nod, reaching out with his other hand to rub the top of her head. "No matter how small a life, how seemingly insignificant, the Force connects everything. Just as Jedi die and become one with the Force, so does anyone else that lives and dies."
"So, when you use your Force, it's like all your family and friends who have died before you are helping you out?"
"Exactly like that," Zekk said tenderly. "Do Hapans have an afterlife?"
"Not really," Taryn shook her head. "Some time after Hapes isolated itself from the rest of the galaxy, the ruling Queen Mother outlawed any religion that did not venerate the Royal Family. You might find remnants of a couple of religions on the more distant Consortium worlds, but general Hapan belief is that dead is dead. After the war, me being a rebellious teen, I dabbled in a few of those Hapan religions to try and make sense of everything. Gods, spirits, life after death, none of them had the answers I was looking for. Besides, I like the idea of the Force better."
"It is amazing," Zekk quipped, his mind drifting to all of the friends he had lost, to the kindly Peckhum who had taken him in.
They started to walk back towards the house when Taryn asked. "Do you visit his grave?"
"Huh?"
"Didn't you just say you missed Peckhum?"
"Thinking of, maybe. I didn't say anything out loud."
"Oh," Taryn blinked wildly.

"Probably a side-effect of the Joining," Zekk sighed, resigned. "They've been stronger after my second go-around with the Killiks. Given that you were never completely cured too, we probably have some residual connection or something."
"Do you mind?" Taryn asked, pulling back slightly to look him in the eyes. She wasn't even bothering to hide the feelings in her rapidly beating heart.
"Do *you*?" Zekk countered, shaking his head.
Taryn shook her head in response and leaned back against him. "No, not really. It's kind of…I don't know, nice? Comforting. Definitely comforting."
"Agreed," Zekk leaned the side of his head against hers, exploring their not-quite-Force-Joiner-caused bond. "To answer your question, no I haven't visited Peckhum's grace. It's on Yavin Four, and after the Vong hit the planet, I wasn't sure if it had survived."
"After this war with the Killiks is over, I'll go with you," Taryn squeezed his hand. "You can introduce me to him and all that."
"He definitely would have liked you. He had a thing for independent-minded people who could keep me in my place."
"I think I would have liked him too," Taryn laughed softly. "Tell me about him?"
"Sure," Zekk nodded, inhaled the crisp morning breeze. It had been a very long time since he had felt the weight on his shoulders evaporate, and walking hand-in-hand with Taryn, it felt as if his entire heart was lighter. He began to regale her with the tales of the aged captain of the *Lightning Rod*, delighting in her laughter and bright outlook on everything. And that was how the rest of the day was spent—hanging around Taryn's childhood home, sharing stories of their childhood.
]-)-III-(-[
Despite Trista's protests, both Zekk and Taryn reported for duty at the end of the week. They were a far cry from the morose corpses they had been at the start of the week, and the change surprised most of the people they knew.
"Are you *sure* you're both okay?" Trista asked softly, the heels of her boots clicking on the marble floor as the trio headed towards the briefing. "You seemed…relaxed."
"We're fine, Trista," Taryn replied with an uncharacteristic reassuring smile. "Probably better than fine."
Trista's gray eyes examined the two of them dubiously, as if she expected them to drop dead without warning.
"Trista," Zekk said gently. "We'll be okay."

"You better," Trista muttered, forcing her gaze to the marble-floored path in front of them.
"So, Zekk, your Jedi insight give you any idea of what we should expect?" Taryn asked cheerfully, trying to change the subject.
"From what Jacen's letting me see, it looks like the Queen Mother is going on the offensive. I mean, we knew the fleets and ground forces were being mobilized, but it seems like Tenel Ka and Jacen are going full-throttle with the attack."
"The knowledge that the attack will be against the Killiks, and not the Corellians, is not wide-spread," Trista supplied. "The Queen Mother didn't wish to tip her hand too early. Though from the briefings I've overheard, the Corellians are likewise mobilizing, giving the impression of an imminent major battle."
Their trek faltered a bit when they saw several dozen gray-skinned reptilians enter the thoroughfare from another hallway. All were dressed in simple clothing, deadly-looking blades tucked into crimson and gold-inlaid sashes.
"What are those?" Taryn whispered in a low voice.
"Noghri. The leader of the group, Sakhisakh, was once Leia Solo's personal bodyguard," Zekk muttered back, some of his information being supplied via Force-meld by Jacen.
"They came with the other delegates brought in by Jedi Knight Solo," Trista sound approving of the group. "In the few joint training sessions they've had with the *Chume'doro*, I've learned that those blades strapped to their belts and bandoleers are definitely not decorative."
"So what did Jedi Solo have to promise them to get them to come here?" Taryn looked to her sister.
"Nothing," a guttural voice sounded from behind them, causing both Taryn and Trista to whirl around blasters drawn. However, the Noghri was faster, two curved knives already held at their throats before they finished their motion. He tisked and shook his head. "A couple decades too young."
"And he," Zekk said, not turning around. "Is Basbakhan. One of Leia Solo's bodyguards during the start of the Vong War. He had to return after the Vong struck Honoghr."
Bowing their heads respectfully, both Taryn and Trista holstered their blasters. "So, why does Leia Solo have these…Noghri bodyguards? Is it standard practice for senators of the galaxy?"
"Very long story," Zekk chuckled.
"Indeed," Basbakhan nodded. "Needless to say, we Noghri consider it the highest honor to safe-guard Lady Vader and her family. By extension, her son and his family as well."

"We don't need help protecting the Queen Mother," Taryn reacted instinctively.
"Probably not. But I believe your talents are going to be used elsewhere in a little bit. Even elite bodyguards cannot be in two places at once."
"You know of the plans?" Trista asked in confusion.
"No, but I know how Lady Vader and her son thinks," Basbakhan answered. "Politics in mind, the Noghri will only see action if things are worse than expected."
"How many Noghri did you bring?" Zekk asked curiously, seeing another dozen emerge from another corridor."
Basbakhan grinned a smile full of razor-sharp teeth. "Nearly two thousand young warriors wished to gain the honor of serving Lady Vader and her clan. It is not every day that Honoghr receives a personal request from Lady Vader asking for our assistance; so when she asks for an army, we shall give it to her."
"Two thousand?" Taryn and Trista's eyebrows shot up in unison.
"All willing to fight to the death if that is the fate that awaits us," Basbakhan seemed infinitely proud of that fact. "Since the great war, there have not been many opportunities for the younger warriors to test their skills in combat."
"You do know most people would be happy to avoid another interstellar war," Zekk mentioned conversationally.
"Noghri are not like 'most people,'" Basbakhan replied with another wicked grin.
The odd group of two Hapans, a Jedi, and a Noghri assassin emerged into one of the palace's many large, sun-lit courtyards. There they merged with the other Hapan officers, Noghri, Dathomiri Jedi, and soldiers from other governments willing to lend a hand. Despite the spaciousness of the flagstone yard, it was nearly filled to the brim. Holocams also floated about, broadcasting the briefing to the officers in their ships in orbit. A lone balcony overlooked the courtyard from high above, black basalt stone absorbing the early sun rays and glowing regally.
The entire courtyard fell silent as the veranda doors to the balcony opened, and the Queen Mother emerged with her daughter in her one arm, and her lover beside her. A sense of purpose suddenly swept through the crowd of thousands. They were fighting not only for Hapes, but for their families. They had a job to do, an oath to uphold, and no price was too small to fulfill it.
"Wow," Taryn murmured, her shoulders square and her head tilted back slightly. She too had been affected by the aura Tenel Ka, Jacen,

and their daughter were exuding. Unlike most in the crowd, however, she wasn't unaware of that fact either. Her past week spent with Zekk had helped her familiarize herself with the some of the affects of the Force. "The Force really is something. I feel like I can take on an entire Killik army all by myself."

Tenel Ka stepped to the balcony railing, handing her daughter to Jacen before turning to address the crowd.

"Our friends, fellow Hapans and those who have come here to defend homes that are not your own, we thank you for your continued support and your belief in us in these trying times. It is no secret that the Royal Navy and Marines have been mobilized, but it is not for the reason many of you may think. It is thanks to our Corellian allies that a dangerous threat has been unmasked within Hapan territory, for if it were not for their efforts, those attempting to mastermind a civil war may have gotten away unscathed. There is another element that exists, one who wishes for Hapes to succumb to petty politicking and internal strife. One who believes the galaxy will be better off if Hapes remains weak, incapable of assisting the galaxy in any way or form. To do this, they desire our deaths, our misery and despair.

But we will not give in. We will fight this threat planet to planet, system to system. Hapes survived the Yuuzhan Vong War, and we will survive this. To show that Hapes does not stand alone in this fight, our new allies from outside the Transitory Mists will be the ones to safeguard this planet and others who have proven their loyalty to the throne time and time again. The Dathomiri Jedi, Royal Marines, Guard, and Navy will be the ones launching simultaneous attacks on compromised worlds, reclaiming them for Hapes and to restore order.

The storm has only just begun to thunder, but we Hapans will not be cowed. We will not lie, the danger is great, and much is at stake. But we…but *I* have faith in all of you. When we emerge victorious, Hapes will finally take its first great steps into the larger galaxy, into a new future, and we will have all of you to thank for that. In the coming weeks and months, perhaps even years, the fate of the Consortium will be decided. It will be up to all of you to decide what you want that fate to be. Now, report to your assigned locations, and may the Force and whatever deities you may believe in, be with us all."

The Queen Mother took her daughter back into her arms and watched as the courtyard became a flurry of action. Squadron and battalion leaders immediately began calling out and filing out of the area in an orderly fashion. The din was complicated by the fact that Hapan and Basic weren't the only languages being spoken. There were Wookie yowls, Noghri grunts, the recognizable tone of Huttese, and many

others. Shuttles parked just outside the palace were filled in record time, departing to their designated ships without delay.
"Alpha squad, to me," Moreem Espara's voice somehow stood out above the mass of moving people and voices. "That includes you too, Jedi Knight Zekk."
"As you command, ma'am," Zekk acknowledged, following the Zel twins over to their commanding officer.
Moreem handed out datapads to the members of her squad. "We have the fortunate job of assisting the Queen Mother in clearing out Zadaria."
"Lucky you, Aros, you get to go home," the brown-haired Beyele remarked, though her eyes were sympathetic.
"Always told mother to call in an exterminator every one and a while," Chiri replied with a long sigh, her worry hidden away by her dry and sarcastic demeanor. "This is what she gets for letting the bugs go out of control."
"According to the intel from the Corellians, there's a massive Killik colony located at the base of the Tinbar mountain range. The Corellian analysts designate the planet as a likely HQ for Killik forces. A fight is definite given that maps of the area show nothing but flat fields for several kilometers in every direction," healer Irina read off.
"The mountains were created by an astrological disaster several millennia ago," Chiri, ever the demolitionist and historian, confirmed. "Nearly rendered the planet uninhabitable. Records show the ground movements were caused when one of Zadaria's smaller moons, Tinbar, was knocked out of orbit by a passing asteroid of about the same size. The mountains are supposedly what is left of that moon."
"What's the terrain used for?" Lieutenant Lovett asked.
"They should be vineyards mostly. Zadaria *is* the Consortium winery after all. Poor farmers probably didn't stand a chance against giant interstellar bugs."
"Okay, cut the chatter people," Moreem broke in. "We get to our assigned ship and help the Queen Mother squash some bugs."

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Onboard the *Dragon Queen*, Tenel Ka's personal Battle Dragon and most advanced ship of its class, the tension was palpable as they neared their destination. Even the approach was filled with undeniable emotion as the Corellians played their game to the very end. They withdrew from a system, the Hapans would advance. They would suddenly fill a system the Hapans vacated, and the Hapans would retreat. If one thing could be said, the Corellians were playing their role as double-agent very convincingly. So much so that even the Hapans

following the Queen Mother began to have doubts as to whether or not the Corellians were really on their side.
Little did they know that Corellian Jedi Tiu Zax and Natua Wan were using the Force to mentally communicate their next moves to Tenel Ka to keep the charade up for as long as possible. Or that in the interim, the Corellians were trying to gather as much intel on the Killik-infested worlds before ceding the territory to the Hapan forces.
Needless to say, that even with the destination two days away, nerves were getting frayed and tempers were short. Already disgruntled with leaving the safety of Hapes to outsiders, led by males no less, many of the Royal Hapan Navy and Guard members spent the days on edge.
Taryn and Trista Zel were no better. Both grew increasingly anxious as the Hapan fleet neared Zadaria. Their previous encounters with the Killiks, or Killik controlled beings, had left a bad taste in their mouths. They were determined to not only not get caught off guard, but also protect those important to their House at the same time.
"Hey," Zekk said gently. Having just arrived in the training room, he placed a restraining hand on Taryn's shoulder. The punching bag she had been pummeling had finally given out, and her knuckles were red and bloodied. "Hey, come on. I think you won."
Panting, sweat dripping from her forehead, Taryn nodded and rested her head and knuckles on the bag. Clad only in a black sports bra and training shorts, Taryn's lean body was still coiled tightly with tension. Her fists were still lightly pressing against the demolished punching bag, leaving bloodstains against the material, but she didn't seem to care. Whatever she had imagined the punching bag to be, obviously wasn't dead enough.
He thought about a few words to say, before mentally shaking his head and going with the Hapan solution. "How about fighting something that hits back?"
"What?" Taryn looked blearily at him.
"Not what, who." Zekk shrugged off his outer Jedi robe and then shed his shirt. "You look like you could use a sparring partner."
Taryn's gray eyes narrowed, but she cricked her head back and forth, tendons popping as she accepted his challenge. "You sure you can handle me?"
"Feel free to go all out," Zekk quipped, stepping onto the sparring mat.
"I intend to," Taryn replied, dropping into a fighter's stance.
A feinted kick followed by an actual kick from the opposite leg started things off. Zekk blocked the blow and countered with a leg-sweep, but Taryn agilely pushed off the ground on the tips of her toes and avoided

it by centimeters. A spinning elbow, redirected by Zekk, was paired with a head-butt, that wasn't blocked.
Taking advantage of Zekk's staggered state, Taryn moved in for the kill. But Zekk grabbed her outstretched arm and attempted to flip her over using her momentum against her. Taryn rolled with the attack, springing up to her feet no worse for wear. A high kick knocked apart Zekk's guard, but he countered by going low and shoulder tackling her to the ground. She squirmed out of his grip and hopped back to her feet once more, expression focused and wrathful. She re-engaged in a heartbeat, hands and feet flying out in rapid precision.
For his part, Zekk focused on parrying or avoiding her attacks. He might not be fully trained in hand-to-hand combat like his Hapan Commando partner, but the Force helped him keep pace all the same. Nevertheless, it was hard, challenging work to keep up with her rapid barrage of fists and legs. His own slender, toned figure glistened with sweat as he endured Taryn's stream attacks; his messy black hair slick with perspiration. Her inability to break his defenses was increasing her ferocity to the point where she began to yell out with every strike. Through the Force and the strange, unique Joiner-bond he had with Taryn, he could feel her every raw emotion. Her fears, her anger, her doubts and hatred, all of the unhealthy thoughts unfit for a soldier in the battlefield, being put into each of her moves. And like a sponge, he absorbed strike after strike without complaint, letting her vent the only safe way she knew how. Hapans, the guard and nobility, were a strong bunch, he knew that. But showing weakness was a big no-no, so emotions had to be tightly controlled. In a way, Zekk mused, shifting his weight to absorb two body-shaking kicks, the Hapan nobility was like the Jedi. Every little action, every little feeling, analyzed by the others for good or ill; and just like the Jedi, the Hapans could do great things if only they could agree to disagree and work together.
As Taryn began to tire, her gray eyes now glimmering with unshed tears, Zekk saw an opening and seized it. Dropping low, he trapped both of Taryn's legs between his own, dragging her down with him. She tried to elbow him, but he caught her arm in one of his and rolled them so that his body was on top of hers. A fighter to the finish, her other arm attempted to punch him, but he gripped that one too and pinned both arms over her head.
The fight was over.
Gasping for air, faces and bodies covered in sweat, Taryn shared a delirious grin with her sparring partner. "Thanks… haven't had…a sparring…session…like that for forever. I needed that."

Now that the emotional storm had passed, however, more tangible matters were brought to Zekk's attention. Namely, Taryn pinned beneath him and the both of them hot and sweaty and wearing thin, minimal clothing. Taryn, the no longer little girl and very much an attractive woman whom he greatly respected. His mouth dried as he saw Taryn in a very different light than he normally did. "You're welcome," he managed to get out.
"Not a lot of chances for me to just really let go," Taryn panted, her gaze locked onto his own.
Her position, with her arms stretched above her, caused each of her breaths to become very distracting for Zekk. Not helping matters was the smoldering look that developed in her gray eyes as Taryn began to understand his sudden tongue-tiedness. Zekk's jaw moved several times once more, and he decided that Taryn's enticing gaze was the safest place to stare at. "Glad I could help."
Her gray eyes continued to search his dark green, the mood between the two of them shifting. In a softer voice, Taryn breathed. "I meant it. Not many people can keep up with me. Match me move for move. It's really rare when I find someone who does."
"And how many of these 'someones' have there been?" Zekk murmured, feeling an alien sensation squeeze his chest. He mentally frowned, why in the Force was he feeling jealous? He quickly scolded that part of his brain for being unreasonable, but focused quickly all the same to hear Taryn's response.
"Well, there's Captain Espara," Taryn murmured, multiple colors dancing in her gray irises. Her lips were quirked upwards in an impish smile as she held their gaze. "And Trista, too."
"That all?"
"There is this desert princess back on Tatooine, but she doesn't count."
"Wasn't she the one you lost me to?" Zekk said playfully.
Taryn growled, swiveling her hips and dislodging him, before rolling on top of him. "I didn't lose. She forfeited."
"The second time," Zekk said mildly, unable to look away from her face. "And there were extenuating circumstances. If you remember, I was there when you and Trista decided to go back for a rematch during that leave period. I clearly recall that Ullaghariui had you on your back, but those settlers from the nearby moisture farm…"
Taryn discovered that you could indeed surprise a Jedi, even if you were straddling him on the floor of a Battle Dragon rec-room. On impulse, she bent down, grabbed his head, and promptly kissed him with everything she had. A startled muffle from Zekk was all that

delayed the kiss, before he reflexively returned her gesture, arms wrapping around her.
Slowly, the kiss ended. Zekk gaped at the red-haired warrior woman as her lips left his own, his mind freezing up completely. Whatever expression he had on his face must not have been what she was looking for because Taryn swallowed heavily, suddenly looking uncertain of herself. She hurriedly got off his stunned figure and sat down at the edge of the mat.
"Sorry, I shouldn't have done that," Taryn gasped out, her eyes squeezing shut. Almost in a panic she began to spew whatever words came to her. "I didn't mean….well, I did mean…but…but…"
This time it was Taryn to be surprised, her eyes flying open again. Zekk's lips were pressed against hers, his hands framing her face. Even if it was a mistake on his part, Taryn wasn't about to pass up another opportunity to kiss him, and she returned the kiss with fervor. Finally, both panting for very different reasons than before, they parted. Giddiness echoed through the strange bond they had, giddiness and joy. Taryn shyly put two fingers to her own lips, her gray eyes sparkling.
"You were saying?" Zekk got out in a rush, his own cheeks flushed.
"Shut up," Taryn grinned almost in embarrassment. She took one of his hands in her own, squeezing affectionately. "See, I didn't lose you to that stupid desert princess. I won."
Someone clearing their throat reminded both Zekk and Taryn that they hadn't been the only ones using the rec-room. Almost hesitantly looking over their shoulder, they saw Trista eyeing them with raised eyebrows. In the background, a half-dozen others were looking on with varying levels of amusement…some exchanging credits.
"Trista?" Taryn said with a nervous smile, inching closer to Zekk.
"Taryn," Trista returned coolly.
"Ummm…I…we…"
"If you're done with the mat, may I use it?" Trista asked, throwing Zekk and Taryn off balance.
"Errr…you're not wondering what's between Zekk and I?"
"Not really. But given your states of dress, I can tell that at the moment, very little is," Trista continued in her same dry voice.
"But Trista…"
"What do you want me to say? 'It's about kriffing time'?" Trista drawled, mischief glinting in her eyes.
"I…" Taryn looked almost fearful. "You don't mind? You weren't so great when I was with…"

"I'm perfectly fine with it, more than fine," Trista said tenderly. She sat down next to her sister, taking one of her hands in her own. "I just want you to be happy, Taryn."
Her fearful expression becoming shy again, Taryn looked over to Zekk. "I am."
Trista changed her gaze to Zekk. "Don't break her heart."
"I won't."
"I know," Trista allowed a rare smile to grace her face. "Now if you're done doing team morale building exercises with my sister, can I please have the mat? I scheduled some time on it with Moreem…Captain Espara."
"Morale building exercises?" Taryn blinked.
"After completing your previous activity with Jedi Knight Zekk, would you say yours and his morale is appropriately raised?"
Zekk and Taryn blushed profusely, but Taryn wasn't about to let Trista get away with that comment. "And what about you? Have you planned any morale building exercises with our squadron leader?"
Trista's cheeks turned a noticeable shade of pink. "That's classified, corporal."
Taryn grinned knowingly and stood, pulling Zekk up with her. "A shame. The mat's all yours."
"How considerate," Trista retorted.
Taryn paused, reaching out to grip her sister's arm. "Tris, you happy? Truly happy?"
Smiling tenderly, Trista gestured to Taryn and Zekk. "I am now."
]-)-V-(-[
"Thank you all for coming."
"It is no problem, *Chume*," Trista said respectfully, taking a seat at the dining table. Gadell, Sanola Ti, Rajade, Taryn, Zekk, and Moreem followed suit with respectful solemness, something that appeared to irk the sitting regent.
"Really, you are all dear friends, please dispense with the formalities for just this meal."
"Sure," Zekk shrugged. Despite his ease at doing so, the other three Hapan women at the table seemed uncomfortable with the abandonment of tradition. He, however, unfolded the napkin in front of him and surveyed the small meal before them. "Your cook, Skarsgård is it, really went all out this time. Don't think I've seen that many inventive uses of military rations in a long time. Did he really liquefy the all-purpose meat squares to make a gravy?"
"Not that big a surprise. We do something similar on Dathomir," Rajade interjected. "But he's right, this really isn't all that bad."

"It did not seem right to feast and enjoy one's self on the eve of war," Tenel Ka replied with a nod. She reached over and served her younger cousins.
"Not complaining," Zekk shrugged. He took an experimental bite. "Pretty good."
"You have been well, my friend?" Tenel Ka raised a scrutinizing eyebrow.
"Much better than before," Zekk continued the conversation. Apparently Taryn, Trista, and Moreem were still searching for their voices, and the Dathomiri Jedi were sharing their amusement at the fact through the Force. "What Jacen did in the meld really helped."
"I am glad," Tenel Ka answered. "We have been through much, have we not?"
"Much would be an understatement," Zekk sighed wryly.
"I may not share in your friendship, but for some reason 'much' doesn't cover what us Jedi go through," Sanola commented.
"Really," Rajade agreed. "What other job expects you to be on call every day in the week with a high possibility of death as your severance package? It's a life though. Not sure how much of one, but it's still a life."
"Cousin," Taryn finally managed, breaking through the Jedi banter. "Taryn?"
"Will Jedi Knight Solo be able to keep order on Hapes while you are away? He doesn't exactly know the nobility, and they will surely try to take advantage of the situation."
"That is why my father stayed behind as well. Between the two of them, we should return to something recognizable," Tenel Ka remarked with a quirk of one corner of her lips. "Plus, I did not wish to bring Allana into battle, and this will give her time to bond with her father."
"It really does seem unfair how politics have to keep you apart," Taryn said sympathetically. "You're doing so much for Hapes, so why can't they just let you be with the man you love?"
Tenel Ka nodded tiredly. "Indeed. But I am determined to leave my daughter a Consortium she will be proud to care for, so the price at the moment has been worth it. If I cannot have the happiness many have, I will at least make sure Allana does."
"A noble goal, Your Highness," Sanola said politely. "Rajade and I fight for similar reasons. So that those on Dathomir can one day live a life free of the strife that has plagued generations past."
The dining party began to relax slightly, taking to the gourmet-prepared version of the military rations with mild enthusiasm.

"Tell me, Captain Espara, Major Vessau, how is the morale among the rank-and-file?" Tenel Ka asked after a brief pause.
The two soldiers looked to one and other, and Gadell motioned for Moreem to speak first.
"High at the moment, *Ereneda.* The arrival of the Jedi coalition of reinforcements has heartened them. The only thing is that many are confused as to who the enemy actually is. They know the Heritage Council plots to kill you, but they are unsure if it is the Heritage Council and their minions that we will be fighting. No one outside of those who have access to galactic codices know what a Killik is. To most, we are fighting a threat that came from the outside."
"The captain is right," Gadell said. "Intel units have picked up a heavy increase in the discussions about Hapes' interactions with the greater galaxy among both civilian and military personnel. Many see the Killik threat as evidence that the Consortium has already become a part of the greater galaxy. Some still advocate that the Killiks are the reason why Hapes should isolate itself even further. They follow you because you are the Queen Mother, but not all believe in the cause they fight for."
"Then again," Zekk said understandingly. "It *has* only been three decades since Hapes decided to start interacting with the rest of the galaxy again. For nearly all of those years, the galaxy was locked in a war, Imperials or Vong. Not exactly the best way to show an isolated government that we have their best interests at heart."
"True," Gadell inclined his head briefly. "But even an idiot can see that Hapes will stagnate, like the Queen Mother said, if we try to pretend the rest of the galaxy doesn't exist. Wishing for something like that will not make it so."
"*Chume*," Trista said carefully, evidently not ready to address her cousin informally.
Tenel Ka just politely oriented her head towards her cousin. "Yes, Trista?"
"If I understand the Killik threat correctly, they threaten more than just Hapes."
"That is a fact," Tenel Ka confirmed. "At this moment, both Jaina and Anakin Solo are spearheading their own assaults on Killik forces in the rest of the galaxy. It is our hope that when combined with our assault, we can eliminate the Killik leaders fomenting this war. We highly suspect the leaders to be two dark Jedi and a former Jedi friend, all of whom went missing over Myrkr some years ago."
"And they've become Joiners somehow," Zekk added. "So they're very confused, and that confusion is rippling down through the Killiks they

have managed to gain control of. If we convince the three that what they are doing is wrong, hopefully the crisis will be over."
"Does this mean we expect one of these Joiner Jedi to be on Zadaria?" Taryn asked.
Tenel Ka and Zekk exchanged a long look, then Tenel Ka answered. "No."
"No?" This time it was Trista, her surprise leading her to question her cousin.
"The…errr…Corellians…have taken up the task of tracking dark Jedi Lomi and Alema Rar," Zekk said. "But seeing as how they're Jedi backed up by the billions of bug minds, we needed a way to keep them occupied."
"So our attacks, the attacks we're expecting on Hapes, they're all diversions?" Gadell said carefully.
"Yes," Tenel Ka replied. "Though we will be able to win this war by conventional means, the loss of life and damage to the Consortium infrastructure would be too great. According to Jacen Solo, we need to weaken the Killik presence then convince Lomi that her course of action is bad for her hive. As both Jysella and Valin Horn are adept at mental manipulation, hopefully they will be able to succeed in their endeavor. It is also why we are attacking the planets that we are. The initial offensives focus on five planets, which the Corellians have confirmed to have the highest concentration of Killiks. Should we and the Corellians succeed, we will have neutralized the Killik threat without further warfare."
"That still leaves the matter of the Heritage Council," Moreem pointed out.
"When the rest of the Consortium rallies around our allies from the greater galaxy, they will have little ground to stand upon," Tenel Ka replied. "Gadell mentioned it earlier, the people are already talking. When they see that Hapes is stronger with allies, that there is much wealth and power to be made by insinuating themselves in galactic politics, the Heritage Council will find itself short on support."
"Well," Zekk wiped his mouth with his napkin and then raised his glass of water. "Here's to hoping all goes well in these coming months."
"Agreed," Taryn matched his toast.
The sound of glassware clinking reverberated throughout the dining chambers as the diners steeled themselves for what was to come.
]-)-Chapter End-(-[

Corellia
]-)-I-(-[

Valin Horn had many regrets in his young life, knew he was more bitter than others his age should be. The Yuuzhan Vong War had shaped him just as much as if he had let Vong shapers cut open his head and mess around with his brains. He had spent the time after the war recovering, rebuilding who he was right along with the rest of the Corellians. He consulted with his father to learn the tools-of-the-trade as a CorSec investigator. Had tagged along with General Antilles and Admirals Delpin and Karathas to learn how to command the newly established Corellian Defense Forces. He had even picked up an apprentice in the form of Omwati teen Tiu Zax, to prove to the others he was similarly devoted to the Jedi Order.

Those who served under him considered him a fair, if not a little severe, commander. Pragmatic, practical, a career soldier, were other words used to describe him; and he considered them compliments. He was fast becoming known for his stoic strength, and the ability to get the best out of those who served under him. His trust was not easily given, but once you earned it, you were given a great deal of leeway in how you interpreted his orders. So long as you had the backs of those around you, it was well known among CorDef troops that Jedi Knight Valin Horn would treat you with respect.

Less flattering were the whispers that he was a droid in disguise, emotionally numb, uncaring of those who served him. That he was a man devoted solely to the mission, to getting the job done, and nothing else. He didn't socialize with the others, didn't seem to have any life outside of the military and the mission. He was an empty shell-of-a-man who existed simply because he did.

It wasn't exactly the person Valin wanted to be, or had even seen himself becoming.

Before the war, as a young teen, he had been a gentle, caring person. Someone quick to trust and fun to be around. He had passed his training days communing with animals, thinking up ways to annoy his sister, and wondering when it would be his turn to join the Solos and Skywalkers of the galaxy in doing something great. Everything had been fun, a big adventure in need of conquering. He had known who he was then; a Jedi just like his father and his grandfather. He had known what his role in the galaxy would be; after all, it had been drilled into his mind since he was old enough to walk. He was to be a protector of the innocent, a bringer of peace.

How quickly all that had changed.

A few years over twenty, his eyes had the look of someone much older, and permanent creases lined his forehead. Even seven years after the end of the war, nightmares still plagued his sleep. More often than not,

he found himself using stimulants to avoid sleep altogether. He had talked with the praxeum healer, of course, even a couple of non-Jedi psychologists, but it didn't seem to help. The only thing that lessened the ghosts that haunted him was by throwing himself headlong into his work.

Not that his family knew this. They already had enough on their minds, and it's not like his nightmares were life-threatening in any way. It was one of the reasons why he had accepted his position as advisor to the CorDef forces, so he could be as away from the rest of his family as often as he could. Never did he think he'd be thankful for the plethora of pirates that had popped up at the end of the war.

Unfortunately, his posting had an unintentional consequence. Making things more difficult to come clean about his struggles was the fact that he was literally in charge of thousands of lives, most of whom were older than him by a decade, even more. If they knew their commander had complained to his mommy because of a few dreams, he'd never live it down. His mom and dad had made it through the same war, and *they* didn't appear to have any trouble, so reason dictated he should be fine too. Even Jysella, for all the times she had been in the frontlines, appeared just a naively innocent as she had been all those years ago.

So, he hid his troubles. Hid the fact that he was haunted by the faces of those he had killed, of those he had seen die. Even in times of peace, he would fight that war within his mind, a war that threatened to consume him whole. The only thing he could do was to keep on fighting, continue to march on and do his duty to the present.

Yet, living away from his parents and sister for so long, Valin had forgotten just how strong a familial connection could be.

Waking up in a sweat-soaked tunic, heart pounding, the after-image of another terror fading from his mind, Valin was surprised to find his sister in the sleeping quarters.

"Val?" Jysella's voice was soft, caring. Out of respect for him, she wasn't probing him with the Force, but she could evidently still feel something bleeding through their sibling-bond.

"I'm alright," Valin said automatically.

"Right, and dad will endorse my application to become an exotic dancer at the nearest Hutt-stronghold," Jysella snarked.

"Mom probably would," Valin pointed out, trying to divert the conversation. "Will say it'll give you 'life experience.' Probably convince dad of that fact too."

"Valin," Jysella said in a tone she had inherited from their mother.

Valin looked away, using the Force at the same time to cool his fevered mind. "Really, Sella, I'm okay. It was just a bad dream."
"Val…"
"I said I'm okay!" Valin snapped, his head whipping back to look at his sister.
Jysella jerked back slightly, hurt appearing in her eyes for a fraction of a second. In the next second, she had closed down their sibling-bond, her emotional walls kilometers high.
"Sella," Valin breathed apologetically, reaching up to rub at his forehead.
"You have them, don't you?" Jysella asked softly, startling Valin.
"Huh?"
"The nightmares?" Jysella asked. She absently touched one of her war-scars through the material of her clothing. "I used to see myself on Mandolore sometimes. All that death, everyone dying. Getting impaled by Vong-staffs didn't help either. Sometimes it was back on Mon Cal. You know, I was supposed to alert the others if the other Vong spies moved, and I wasn't able to let Barv know in time, and those people all died… Then there were those ones where I'm on Corellia, but this time the Vong find me and do to me what they did to Tahiri."
"I…I never knew."
"That's because you were never home you big gundark!" Jysella snapped accusatory. "When I needed my big brother, you were off playing policeman and chasing pirates! I was only thirteen years old! Did you really think I'd be okay with everything I saw!"
Valin winced, looking away again. "I…How did you deal with your dreams? It sounds like you don't have them anymore."
"Only sometimes now, they're not as frequent. Mom would wake me up sometimes, it's like she had this sixth sense, you know," Jysella joined him in scrutinizing the wall. "But most of the time I'd just dance them away. I owe so much to Alema because of that. I just dance to the Force, let it take away all my burdens, and I'll be okay."
Feeling his hopes die, Valin just sighed deeply, his eyes closing. "I can't do that. I have to keep to my duties as a Jedi. To make sure that the lives of everyone who died actually meant something."
"But Valin, you *can* take a break you know."
"No, Sella. You don't understand. I *need* those burdens. I *need* to feel the pressure they make." Valin rubbed at the scar across the bridge of his nose. "I have a purpose with those burdens, can *feel* the duty I have to do. I can't just run away from it, even temporarily. How can I even begin to have a normal life, a relaxing break, after everything I

saw? I killed a good friend, saw one of my other friends get her arm chopped off!"
"Have you told anyone about this?"
"Who would I tell? The civilian doctors I went to? What would they know about what I saw? They've never experienced it firsthand. Master Krahnn? Sure he survived the Purge, but I barely know him. I can get through this, Sella. I have been for the past seven years."
Jysella bit her lower lip. "You have to tell someone though."
"I can handle it," Valin shook his head. "Sorry for waking you."
"I should be up anyway, we'll be at our destination in another hour." Avoiding both Hapan Royal Navy and Heritage Council ships meant that the relatively short hop from Terephon to Relephon had turned into a full two-day travel using obscure hyperspace routes. "But Val…"
"Sella, just drop it."
"Okay, okay, consider it dropped." Jysella got back to her feet and left the room without another glance back.
Despite her words, Valin knew his sister better than to believe it, and he couldn't help but feel a tad bit annoyed. He was a twenty-three year old man, he could take care of himself.
He swung himself out of the bunk and moved to the sink. After splashing water on his face, he absently felt at the stubble around his chin. Shadows and lines surrounded his eyes as he gazed at himself in the mirror above the sink. So this was what his sister saw, no wonder why she looked so shocked. Normally he used the Force and his family's proclivity for mental manipulation to hide the bags under his eyes from everyone else. Even during the family dinners, the rare times he returned to Corellia on his mom's request, he had kept up the charade. He clenched his jaw tightly, pushing a fist against the mirror and resting his forehead against the cool surface.
With Jysella going off after a dark Jedi whom she apparently idolized, he couldn't afford to let his own demons get in the way. After splashing more water on his face, Valin turned around and grabbed his Jedi robes. When he was somewhat presentable, and using the Force to shroud the stress visible on his face, he emerged from the sleeping cabin.
"ETA?" He asked briskly.
"Forty-five minutes," Jysella chimed back. She looked over her shoulder, her eyes searching his face in the dim glow of the cockpit lights. They widened slightly when she saw that he looked as healthy as ever, and then narrowed as she understood what he had done.
"Mom is *so* going to murder you when she realizes what you've been doing the past seven years."

"Why would she? It's not like she's going to find out," Valin said darkly.
Jysella rolled her eyes, but didn't press the issue. "If you're going to be like this for the entire mission, maybe it's better I went searching for Alema by myself. Force knows what will happen if we go to Relephon and you're still that nice gloomy dark side cloud of unhappiness."
"I'll be…"
"Fine, I know," Jysella shook her head. "Really Val, it's not healthy to keep all that negatude in."
"Who are you, Tahiri?"
"Oh, did you hear? She's back," Jysella perked up.
"Great, why don't you go stalk her instead of a dark Jedi Twi'lek of questionable sanity."
Jysella punched him in the arm. "Listen Mr. Dark Side Cloud of Gloom."
"I thought it was unhappiness."
"Shut up," Jysella glowered. "If you are going to help me on this, *try* to at least act like you're keeping an open mind? I did what you said and reflected on the situation. In the end, I decided that Alema is still my friend, still capable of being saved. You must have agreed with that somewhat, why else did you agree to tag along? And don't give me that nerf-fodder about our parents grounding you to the next decade. You're hardly home enough as it is so they'd definitely have much better reasons to ground you."
"This is going to be the longest forty-five minutes of my life," Valin deadpanned, sliding into the co-pilot's seat. "And that was before knowing we were heading into possible hostile territory without a single plan."
"Meh, they never survive contact with the enemy anyways," Jysella continued the banter.
Despite her light tone, Valin could sense her Force-probes searching out his emotional state. Though annoyed, he knew that blocking her would only encourage her to continue. So he did the next best thing, pretend it wasn't happening.
"You've changed a lot, Val," Jysella's voice sounded hurt, so he glanced at her. She, however, kept her gaze on the blue vortex of hyperspace outside the window. "You used to be so…different."
"Yeah, well, that was before I fought in a war against a bunch of pain-loving zealots. Sorry I didn't come out the same person."
"I am too."
More silence passed, only the faint chirping of one of the many computer consoles filling the air.
"Val?"
"Sella?"

"Thanks for coming along. I don't think I would have been able to do this without you."
"You're my little sister."
"Yeah?"
"Listen, Sella. No matter what's going on in my head, you're my sister. Nothing's going to change that."
"Eve if I pledged to become a dark Jedi-in-training to stop a secret cabal of Sith Lords and Ladies from taking over the galaxy?"
Wondering where she came up with such ridiculous scenarios, it was now Valin's turn to roll his eyes. "Yes, even then."
"I'll hold you to that."
"Wait, do you mean…"
"We've hit an uncharted gravimetric disturbance," Jysella said hastily, typing into the computer in front of her. "Dropping out of hyperspace in three…two…one…"
The cone of stars and compressed space evaporated, and a greenish-tinged expanse of space took its place.
"*This is the Royal Navy Battle Dragon Kendall to unidentified shuttle. Power down your engines and state your business or you <u>will</u> be fired upon. If you harbor any Corellian fugitives, know that the sentence for abetting enemies of the crown is death."*
The two Horns looked at one and other in exasperation. Valin couldn't really believe it. They had already run into trouble and they hadn't even reached their destination yet! Maybe it was a mistake agreeing to Jysella's Solo-style plan. Then again, if it had been one of his friends of questionable Force-loyalty, maybe he would have done the same thing. Or not, he reflected. He wouldn't be burned again.
As the Battle Dragon loomed ever closer, Valin just sighed. Linking to his sibling bond, the two powerful mind-manipulators reached out to the dozens of minds aboard the bridge of the capital ship in front of them. Some people—see mom and dad—might have been worried at the ease in which they convinced the crew of their innocence and were sped on their way.
But they didn't exactly have the luxury of explaining things in person when all of Hapes was about to erupt in a bug-induced civil war.
]-)-II-(-[
"*Welcome to Saf'aeron, home of the AlGray luxury resort and spa chain. Out of consideration to other guests, please stay within the demarcated traffic lanes as you approach the starport. Your cooperation is much appreciated and we hope you enjoy your time here on Relephon Nine."*

The welcoming message, broadcasted in the Hapan native tongue, filled the open-comm channel as the Horns' shuttle approached one of Relephon's many moons. Since only official ships got to land on Sapphire, and the Horns wanted to keep a low-profile, they had to continue their roundabout journey by traveling to another moon first. This particular moon, translated in Basic as Heaven's Ocean, was part of an intricate seven-moon construct, each moon connected by a super tensile, enclosed tramway or turbolift. It was blue, of course, just like the massive gas giant above. But this time the hue was because its mostly liquid surface reflected the glowing light from above. A singular island towards the equator contained a massive hotel that reached up to the skies. Other smaller resorts rose up out of the water, or even hovered above it on repulsor-pads. And despite Hapes being on the verge of a civil war, the resorts all seemed heavily occupied.

"At least we can blend in," Valin muttered, their shuttle settling behind a fairly good-sized line to the starport.

"It's almost like it was on Terephon," Jysella shook her head in amazement. "Like the war is just a game being played by the nobles and no one else really cares."

"It's probably nothing new for them. I mean, Hapes has existed for centuries with attempted coups practically a trademark of their culture. The people over on Hapes may change, but unless something big happens, the rest of the Consortium continues to go about their business."

"But this time is different," Jysella protested. "Corellia's involved, the Jedi are involved, the Bothans, and who knows who else from the rest of the galaxy is involved."

"And the only people to see these soldiers from outside the Consortium are from Hapes or the noble households and military," Valin reminded. "Until we arrived at Terephon, none of the people on that planet had even *heard* of Corellia. Add to the fact that the Transitory Mists makes holo-comm calls all but impossible for most of the Consortium, and the fact that the hyperspace routes are unstable at best, and the Queen Mother and all the nobles might as well be in their own little world."

"I guess I'm still getting used to the idea that there are actually parts of the galaxy that are as isolated as the Consortium," Jysella sighed. "It just seems so…surreal. A civil war is about to break out and this resort moon is packed with Hapan tourists. I don't even see a single military ship in the area, and Relephon is supposed to be home to one of the key members of the Heritage Council. If this were Corellia, a ship wouldn't even get within a single parsec of the system without being boarded."

"If it makes you feel better. That Royal Navy ship did try to stop us," Valin replied dryly.
"Yeah, well…I hope I don't offend the Queen Mother, but the Consortium is a bit too weird, even for the stuff we normally get into."
"Speaking of stuff we get into, do you still have a lead on our dark side Twi'lek mark?"
"*Alema* is still on Sapphire as far as I can tell," the note of annoyance in Jysella's voice piquing their sibling disagreement. "She's not exactly shielding me, so I think she knows we're coming."
"Just great," Valin threw his hands up in the air and leaned back into his chair. "So we're going to be marching into a bug-infested cavern with two dark siders who know we know where they are?"
"That sounds about right."
"And don't think I've forgotten that little quip earlier about joining the dark side."
"Who are you, dad?"
"That'll be a fun conversation. 'Hi father. Yeah, about that brat sister of mine, your daughter. She went and decided that dark Jedi accessorize better and decided to become one of them. You know, the black lip-gloss and eyeliner with those painted nails. No dad, I'm sure it's not a phase she'll grow out of any time soon. No I didn't tell her she was fat and had to lose weight. The dark side diet is horrible on the skin and you know how vain my sister is. Why is it my fault my little sister becomes a Sith?'"
Jysella used her feeble skill with telekinesis to float a datapad into his face.
"Seriously though, Sella…" Valin grumbled.
"If you're so worried about me, why don't you help out too?" Jysella said lightly. "You already have that dark and brooding character down, and you ace the pessimistic-fatalist personality test, so the dark Jedi will welcome you quite happily."
"Did you just call me a dark Jedi?"
"Only if your ears are plugged up."
"Why is it that we spend most of our conversations arguing?"
Jysella busied herself with the computer console and responded with clipped words. "*Maybe* it's because you find fault with everything I do. *Maybe* you believe the exact opposite of what I do. I believe in giving people chances. *You* believe in looking for a reason to execute them as soon as you can. I like friendships, you like trusted subordinates who'll get the job done. Don't know if you see a pattern, but it kind of clashes."

Valin exhaled sharply, glaring out at the distant stars. The emotions he kept bottled up threatened to break free and he was reminded once again just why he kept his family at a distance. Again, it wasn't like he had chosen to be the person the war had made him into. But the Valin Horn who had been at the Shelter and dreamed of fighting the good fight with the rest of the Jedi had started to die that day on Mon Cal when the Vong infiltrators launched their attack. Each day involved in the war he would die a little more, until that day on Yaga Minor. The moment his lightsaber skewered Sah Vorrik, what was left of that naïve teen had died completely and left an empty shell in its place.

The distress, the anguish, the grief at that Valin long gone, they finally overwhelmed the barriers he had put up. He gripped the steering yolk tightly, his teeth grinding as his vision blurred slightly. *Not now*. He couldn't afford to fall to pieces, not now, not ever. He released a pained breath, the ghost of battles fought roaring in his head. The last battle wasn't even a physical one.

He could see it clearly as if he were still there, the shuttle around him fading away and replaced by the biologically altered hall of the Well of the World Brain.

"*Do you have any idea what to do?" One of the surviving commandos asked he and Natua.*

"*Jacen's giving us a few instructions," Valin replied in affirmative. He swallowed momentarily, feeling a swell of Force energy resonate from behind them. If he closed his eyes and tapped into the Battle Meld, he could clearly sense Ganner Rhysode in the fight of his life, buying them the precious minutes they needed. "The Shapers interacted with the World Brain through their Vong computers and cognition hoods. We basically have to talk the World Brain down, tell it to tell all the things it's connected to to stand down."*

"*Good luck," the commando replied solemnly, setting up behind a fallen piece of duracrete, rifle pointed back towards the entryway. Valin could feel Natua's gaze locked in the same direction. "Green Girl. He has a job to do, we have ours."*

"*I know," Natua's voice contained no emotion, her face blank. "Let's get it done. Then we can go back and help Jedi Knight Rhysode out."*

"*Yeah."*

Valin strode over to one of the fleshy pods at the base of the giant, pulsating organism and brushed the control nerves on the side. He had seen the way Vong-tech worked, had even 'talked' with a few of the ships owned by the Freed Yuuzhan Vong. Ever since he was a child he had had an affinity for communicating with animals, whether it was the

smallest of bugs, or the larger predators that once roamed Yavin Four's forests.
He briefly wondered if those creatures had survived the Yuuzhan Vong attack, but shuttled that thought aside and refocused on the massive organic mind before him.
Talking to a brain that controlled an entire planet was more than a little removed from those past experiences. It was a creature on a magnitude with which he had never conversed with. In the back of his mind, he could still hear the thoughts Jacen was sending his and Natua's way, trying to prepare them for what to expect. He was slightly grateful for the instruction, and was also grateful that the World Brain wasn't wholly invisible in the Force. Connected as it was to the entire planet, he could sense a smoky aura coming from the creature, and it helped to steady his nerves.
Meeting Natua's determined gaze with one of his own, they exchanged nods and stepped into the fleshy pods.
Valin closed his eyes, feeling the tendrils of the cognition hood make contact with his forehead and the base of his neck. After a second, an icy coldness rushed through his body, and he gasped, eyes flying open. However, they weren't seeing the ruined ceiling of the Senate Chamber. Images, sensations, faster than his mind could process, raced through him.
He was a Fire Breather, defending the planet from the invaders, fire spewing on those who hurt it with their light-emitting weapons.
He was a rakamat proud and strong, trampling beneath his feet whoever got in his path.
He was a battalion of Yuuzhan Vong warriors, being directed by instincts they didn't quite understand.
He was the trees burning in combat.
He was the living buildings crumbling under the chaos.
He was the maw lurr, desperately trying to consume the thousands who died, but overwhelmed by all the waste fed to it.
Pain, distress, panic. How was he to regulate a world that seemed bent on destroying itself?
The emotions, the childlike innocence of a creature entrusted with a task it wasn't mature enough to carry out, magnified by a mind many times greater in magnitude than his own. It was confused, unable to comprehend just why things were happening. Why it was hurting, unable to do what it was created for. It had listened to all of Shimrra's commands, done its best to please its master, but still he was angry. Still he asked for the planet to be torn up, for the skies to thunder, and the fires to burn brighter and hotter than ever before.

It was drowning in death, in destruction, and now that two more minds were in contact with it—like a drowning creature in desperate need to hold onto anything—it was going to take them down with it as well.
The minutes stretched on.
Valin gasped, feeling him lose himself. The memories and emotions that had been building up being ripped free so that the World Brain was experiencing it too. He relived every moment, re-felt every instance in crystal clear detail. The pain of loss, the sacrifice of family friends, the fear of dying.
Natua's own hidden emotions were likewise forced forward. The Falleen's fears, her hopes, her silent anguish and rage. A second later, a sharp pain shot like lightning through their minds, and Valin instantly knew that Ganner Rhysode was no longer among the living. Despair, doubt, helplessness at being unable to complete their duty in time to help him. Valin could see Natua on a level he had never seen the Falleen Jedi before. His mind, already spinning from the connection to the World Brain, felt as if it would burn up with the additional input.
Too much. It's all too much!
The thought resonated between the three joined minds.
What should I do to make it stop?
Make it stop.
Make it stop.
The World Brain would have cried in relief if it could have. For almost its entire existence, it only knew the commands of Shimrra. But now, two new and powerful minds were giving it an alternative, a chance to make sense of the impossibility of its task.
Everything had to stop. The war had to end. No more death. No more fear. Just peace.
Peace.
The minutes ticked by as the command rippled out through the hundreds of thousands of lifeforms on Coruscant.
Peace.
The word echoed again and again, stretching out across the planet. Fire Breathers ceased their fiery attacks and lumbered away from the battle field. Rakamat halted their charges and backed up in slow, uneasy steps. The Yuuzhan Vong lost coordination, lost the will to fight. Planet-based coralskippers balked at their pilot's commands and landed. The Maw lurrs ceased to regurgitate their meals. The roar of battle slowly dying away.
The war might have been over outside, but the young teen could still feel it pounding away within his very soul. He had relived the entire

war, not only through his own experiences, but through the memories of the World Brain. He felt old, so old and tired...
"Val!" Jysella's yell snapped him back to the present.
Valin jerked in alarm, hand flying to the hilt of his lightsaber before he registered where they were. Apparently, during his flashback, Jysella had guided them into the spaceport and to a berth. Almost sheepishly, he relaxed his grip and tried to casually lean back in his chair.
Jysella clearly wasn't fooled. "You *need* to talk to someone."
"Fine, when this Killik mess is over," Valin said tersely. "Don't we have your Twi'lek to track now?"
Jysella undid her seat's safety harness. "We do. Are *you* going to be in any shape to help?"
"You sure as Sith aren't going to track her by yourself."
"Fine," Jysella mimicked his annoyed tone. "Then let's get started. If what I'm reading from her is right, they don't plan to move any time soon."
]-)-III-(-[
Their trip off the luxury resort moon of Saf'aeron was a bit less dignified than their trip in. The Horns, however, were greatly aided by the Force abilities, manipulating mind after mind to get to their destination unrecognized, noticed, or remembered. Now they were on a mining trawler, heading to a moon only a hundred-and-fifteen kilometers away from Saf'aeire. Said moon was connected to Saf'aeire via a tramway that stretched between the two moons and was the only way to reach the heart of House AlGray's domain if one didn't have an invitation. Used to transport supplies to the otherwise barren Saf'aeire, the hour-long ride was guarded by an AlGray militia station on both ends.
"Any luck?" Valin asked casually, half-heartedly playing a game of pazak with a group of miners on board. Being able to use the Force meant that the game wasn't exactly a fair one, and he was up several hundred credits.
Jysella, perched on a barstool, nodded. "You want the bad news or good news first, Val?"
"Good."
"Alema knows we're coming and welcomes our approach."
"And the bad?"
"Lomi also knows we're coming and is pretty furious about it."
"Ah." Valin briefly waved a hand at the other gamblers, and got to his feet. After feeling slightly guilty, he refunded the miners of their credits and made them believe he was never part of the game. He then sat on

a stool next to his sister and ordered a drink from the bar-tending droid. "So, are we sticking to our plan?"
"Not much we can do now," Jysella shrugged. "We'll be docking in another ten. Short of hijacking this ship and crashing it onto Sapphire, there isn't much we can do."
Valin took that in with a nod.
"That was sarcasm by the way," Jysella said quickly. "Dad has a thing against acts of wonton destruction in the name of the galactic good."
"Grandpa Booster doesn't seem to mind them," Valin replied evenly.
"That's because Grandpa Booster's a smuggler."
"You know how he feels about the 's' word now. He's reformed."
"So those twenty crates weapons he sold to Bwahl the Hutt despite the arms embargo last year was what?" Jysella said wryly.
"Charity," Valin said with a faint smile. "And now who's the one channeling dad?"
Then, in a split second, the entire atmosphere changed.
Literally.
A hull breach on the opposite side of the mess-hall promptly sucked out most of the miners in the room and pulled on Jysella and Valin with intense vacuum. Another explosion echoed dimly through the corridors of the ship, and the two Jedi could see a gout of fire race down the lone hallway that led to the aft portion of the vessel.
"What was that you said about us crashing?" Valin yelled over the rush of air.
"Shut up."
They were two of six other people trying to claw their way to the stern-side hatch.
Two of five, as another explosion rocked the vessel and dumped an unfortunate Hapan into the void of space.
"I know this is a mining trawler, but doesn't it have any shields?" Jysella said incredulously.
"Hey, look, the moon's getting closer," Valin shouted sarcastically, pointing to the hull breach and the occasional view of the rocky moon outside.
"If only we could use the Force to slow us down."
"At least there's practically no atmosphere so we won't burn up on re-entry."
"You're just full of optimism today, aren't you?"
Another set of explosions sent the ship into a death-spin, making the other three survivors survivors no longer.
"You know the last time I was on a crashing ship, I ended up in the Well of the World Brain," Valin continued in a dry voice. He paused for a

moment to use his physical strength to pull his younger sister through the hatch. "So maybe we'll crash into a bug nest or something."
"You're not making me feel better, you know," Jysella panted back, ears popping. "We have to get to the emergency supplies. Even us powerful Jedi can't live off of vacuum."
"If we were Givin we could."
"That's a given," Jysella retorted, slapping her brother's arm.
"We *could* die in the crash before we suffocate."
"Go back to being falsely optimistic," Jysella said quickly.
Even with what was left of the mining trawler careening like a drunken spacer on a month-long spice binge, they managed to reach the supply closet and pull out emergency rebreathers. With real-life experience they never really should have had, they pulled the masks over their mouths and tightened the straps. Even then, the seconds, and the distance to impact seemed to go by extremely quickly.
"Well, the bridge is gone, so are the engines," Valin said, glancing over the read-out on one of the auxiliary computers.
"Are you thinking what I am?" Jysella groaned.
Valin painfully nodded. "Yeah."
"I'm so glad mom and dad aren't here," Jysella shook her head.
The two hurried back through the ship towards the aft, a feat made nearly impossible by the way the vessel was spinning uncontrollably. If it wasn't for the Force absorbing the momentum, the trip *would* have been impossible. They managed to get to the flaming and charred rear of the vessel, the glow of the Transitory Mists alternating with the dazzling blue-ness of Relephon. Using the Force to help their timing, they reached out and held each other's hands.
"Here goes nothing."
"This is going to look interesting on a report," Jysella smiled nervously.
Valin could feel his younger sister's fear, and immediately reached out with the Force to assuage it. "We'll make it."
"We better," Jysella breathed.
They mentally counted down, trying their best to maintain their footing as they did. Just before the hulking mass touched down, the two leaped out of the blown out back, propelling themselves high and clear of the doomed skeleton that had once been a mining trawler. Still holding each other's hands, they both sailed through the air, a silent shockwave buffeting them as the ship exploded.
A very long few seconds of falling followed, and then a very rough landing as both of them toppled to the dusty ground in unceremonious heaps.
"Ouch," Valin groaned.

"Owie," Jysella echoed. If it hadn't been for the Force, they would have suffered some very life-threatening fractures. But for someone who had just jumped out of the flaming remains of a plummeting vessel, they were otherwise unscathed.
"Jumping out of an exploding ship, don't think the Solos have done that yet," Valin breathed into his rebreather, the adrenaline of what they had just done still pumping.
"When did it become a contest?"
"Didn't you see the Galactic Star magazine's list of top ten Jedi?"
"When did *you* get a chance to read that trash?"
"It was the only one available in the 'fresher."
They weakly pulled themselves up into seated positions. "So?"
"So what?"
"Where do we rank?"
"You called the magazine trash."
"Still," Jysella pressed.
Valin rolled his eyes, his sister proving once again why he was reluctant to get involved with the opposite gender. "Jacen Solo came in third. Ben Skywalker was second. Anakin Solo was first."
"And us?"
"You were tenth."
"And you?"
Valin felt heat fill his cheeks and he looked away.
"Val~in."
"I wasn't ranked, okay?" Valin gritted out. Then, almost mulishly, he added. "I got an honorable mention though."
"Really?"
"Do you need me to go get you a copy of that holomag?"
"No, I believe you."
"Wait…what is that supposed to mean?"
"Nothing," Jysella giggled. "You *are* very honorable though."
"Go space yourself," Valin grumbled, getting to his feet and dusting himself off. They took a moment to regain their bearings.
The translunar tram-line was visible on the horizon, emerging up from over a series of hills. It meant a long walk in near-freezing temperatures with little atmosphere, over a moon with barely any atmosphere. All so they could reach a tram to take them to a dusty moon with near-freezing temperatures probably infested with a nest of hostile creatures.
"We *need* to re-evaluate our life's choices," Valin sighed, scratching the back of his head. They began their trek, the minimal atmosphere meaning their footsteps over the rocky ground were barely audible.

"Hey, we're Jedi," Jysella chirped.
"That isn't a good excuse or reason," Valin grumbled. "If we Jedi picked a less life-threatening activity to fulfill our lives, there'd be more of us out there. It's like the Force weeds out all the ones with a death-wish and keeps the stupid, passive Jedi for last."
"So we're the ones with a death wish?"
"What else would you call what we're doing?"
"Rescuing a friend from hostile territory."
"With zero support, zero chance of rescue, and the fate of this entire sector hanging on the balance," Valin added dryly. "You heard the comm I received from Zax. Jacen and everyone else are relying on us to take out bug-queen and her evil Twi'lek henchwoman…ouch!"
"Really Valin."
"What about that was untrue?" Valin retorted harshly, breath appearing in his rebreather mask.
"There are times when I really don't know you any more, Val."
"There are times when I really don't know myself either," Valin admitted quietly. He could feel his sister's discomfort with his statement and knew he was ruining the 'big brother' image she had in her mind. Feeling a pang of regret and disappointment for voicing his opinion, he decided to change the subject. He jerked a thumb back to the wrecked ship now a hilltop away. "What do you think shot us down? The Hapans?"
"Those blasts didn't feel like laserfire," Jysella shook her head. "Then again, it *has* been a while since I was on a ship getting shot at."
"I don't think it was laserfire either," Valin agreed. "But if it wasn't the Hapans, and it definitely wasn't the Corellians…"
"You're saying the Killiks shot us down?" Jysella raised an eyebrow.
"You said it yourself, Lomi doesn't want us paying her a visit."
"But that would mean the Killiks have ships in the area. We had the entire Corellian taskforce in the region and didn't detect a single thing."
"Yes, because we were definitely looking for bug-manufactured fightercraft," Valin deadpanned. "So, since Queen Bug knows we're coming, do you mind cutting your link to Alema? If those fighters shoot apart the tramway and we're on the tram, well, let's just say crashing once a day is my limit. We have a general idea of where they are, we can trust in the Force from there."
Looking dissatisfied, yet knowing he was right, Jysella clenched her jaw and nodded once. After a moment of concentration, her Force-presence shifted slightly as she put up barriers between hers and Alema's unique bond. "Happy?"

"When this mess is over, I will be."
"Will it?"
"Sella?"
"When this is over, what happens next? And after that?"
Valin exhaled long and slow, the militia base at the foot of the tramway coming visible over the next set of dunes. "We keep on doing what we have to, Sella. We soldier on. It's what we agreed to do by being Jedi."
"Will it ever end?"
"When we're dead," Valin shrugged nonchalantly. "Or if we decide to quit being Jedi. A galaxy completely at peace isn't possible, so Jedi will always be needed."
"It's kind of sad to think about that way."
"It's the truth," Valin replied evenly. "And since I have no desire to stop being a Jedi, I'll continue to seek out the darkness and it will either kill me or I will beat it."
Valin stopped in his tracks when he felt Jysella stop several steps behind him.
"Sella."
"Why are you living, Val? No, wait, living is the wrong word. Why do you continue to exist?"
"Exist?" Valin asked, staring at the distant militia base.
"What are you living for?" Jysella pressed. "What makes you get up in the morning eager to face the next day?"
"That one's easy. The nightmares. If I'm awake and working, I don't remember the dreams of that night."
"Valin!"
"What do you want me to say, Sella? That I barely care if I'm alive or dead? That these past seven years I've felt like a ghost, like I'm stuck in the past and everything I do or say is because of what happened during that kriffin war? Are we going to talk about this every single moment or focus on the mission?"
"I'd like to think the person watching my back in a nest full of dark-side corrupted bugs is just slightly sane," Jysella shot back sharply. "I get that Valin Horn died in the war, I really do. Some part of me never made it out of that hell-hole either. But existing simply because your body refuses to die is an insult to all our friends and everyone else who didn't make it out of the war. Waiting to die, having that death wish, means that the dark side is only one more person stronger. I *want* my big brother back. The one who joked with me, who taught me how to talk with animals and perform those Force tricks. I want you to let me into that dense cloud of sea-foam you call a brain and help you! I'm your little sister for spacer's sake! Here I am trying to make all of

Corellia a better place, and my own brother is secretly falling to pieces? How do you think *I* feel, discovering after all this time that my big brother's been in pain for seven years and I knew nothing about it! Frell, in those seven years, this mission is the longest we've been at each other's side and all we can do is yell at each other."
They both fell silent, their gazes rooted in opposite directions. Their conversation was once again halted as a spike of danger echoed through the Force.
Stiffly, Valin focused on the militia outpost, using the Force to enhance his vision. "The building's completely dark. And I don't feel a single person inside there."
"It would explain why no one came out here to investigate the crash," Jysella said sullenly. "Tram still seems online though."
"Great." Valin rubbed at his face tiredly, slightly annoyed when his rebreather mask got in the way. "Hopefully the tram's environmental systems are still up too."
"Only one way to find out."
]-)-IV-(-[
It was almost eerie in nature, stepping into the barracks through the building's airlock.
It was a tomb, Valin re-evaluated, sharp hazel eyes spotting the dozens of desiccated human corpses still lying in their bunks. The air was icy cold and stale, preserving the dead bodies almost perfectly. Even with a basic examination, Valin could tell that these men and women had been dead for quite some time. Which begged the question: how come none of the previous supply convoys mentioned this on their trips to Sapphire?
"Creepy," Jysella shuddered, changing out her rebreather with a new one by the airlock. Valin followed suit, not trusting the structural integrity of the building. "Is it just me or is the Force a little bit wonky in this place?"
"Wouldn't have used wonky, but something's off," Valin confirmed, stopping by one bunk to examine a body. The corpse was completely drained of any and all fluids, skin clinging to the skeleton and eyes completely sunken into the skull. Using the Force, Valin could feel residual pain and terror in the room, along with an unquenchable thirst and hunger. Feeling a chill go up his spine, he looked to his sister. "We can't do anything for them now, and I'm not sensing anything living in this place. Let's get to the tram and continue our mission."
They stepped through the barracks and into the adjoining hallway, lights flickering on with a steady hum. They froze at the sight the illumination revealed. The hallway was jam-packed with even more

bodies. Each of these corpses were standing upright or in running positions, some on top of another as if they had tripped and died where they had fallen. These corpses were just as drained as the ones in the barracks, little more than shriveled husks over bone. Some faces were locked into positions of abject terror, mouth wide open as if trapped in an eternal scream. Glancing into the various side-rooms, Valin and Jysella could see that the occupants of said rooms had suffered similar fates. There were a few blaster-burns marring the hallway wall, as if someone had tried to mount a desperate defense. But that someone had obviously lost. It was evident that they had all been running for the airlock, chased by some unknown foe.
It was frighteningly unnerving, and Jysella and Valin hastened through the macabre hallway, the only sounds were their heavy breaths in their rebreathers.
"Okay, officially scared now," Jysella swallowed, shying away from the desiccated corpse of a Hapan engineer.
"That makes two of us," Valin breathed. He paused to look at a readout on the wall. "Here, look, a map of the place."
"Tram is three levels up, goody."
"It's a good thing that whatever did all this left the power on," Valin gestured to the flickering lights that lined the corridor.
"Then let's keep going. I don't want to be in this place a moment longer than we have to.
The two Jedi were on the verge of exiting the hallway and into a stairwell when they felt the warning in the Force and the presence of thousands of life-forms suddenly appear all around them. A low buzzing sound filled the air and Jysella and Valin reflexively pulled out their lightsabers.
"One of them just moved!" Jysella blurted, pointing a finger at one of the dried up corpses.
"It's just your imagination, they're all dead."
"No! Look!"
Valin refocused, then blinked wildly. One of the corpses had changed its orientation and was now facing them. After another long second, another corpse seemed to rotate on the spot. And another. And another. With vacant, sunken eyes, hollowed out cheek bones, the skin-covered skeletal figures swayed in the direction of the Jedi one after another. Soon, the entire hallway was full of standing, desiccated corpses that had changed the direction they had been standing in.
"What…the…"

From out of the corpses' mouths a tide of black, mosquito-like creatures shot out in an angry swarm, the bodies collapsing into dust in the swarm's wake.
"Run!" Valin yelled.
More corpses in the hallway and nearby rooms began to twitch and dance, swelling for a second, before additional swarms of the black insect burst free. They came out of mouths, out of leathery limbs that broke free from the pressure, out of stomachs and hollowed out chests, everywhere. They came until it looked as if a giant wave of insects had flooded the hallway, intent on drowning their prey in their murky mass.
"They're tracking our heat signature," Valin said tersely, using his innate ability to with animals to skim the primal instincts of the swarm following them. They sprinted up the stairwell, the heels of their boots clanging loudly against the metal surface as the swarm buzzed angrily behind them.
"Think they're Killik too?"
"Probably. I'm sure we would have heard of an uninhabitable moon containing giant-size mosquitoes that live in the bodies of their victims."
"Blast it!" Jysella swatted away a flurry of bugs that burst out of a vent. "At this rate, we'll be turned into Jedi-leather before we even get near the tram."
"If I recall the schematics right, the power generators were on the roof."
"What does that have to do with anything?"
"Feel like becoming a Jedi bug-light?"
Jysella blinked wildly at her brother, her wide-eyed expression showing she fully understood what he was saying. "I thought you came with me to minimize life-or-death situations, not create them."
"The alternative at the moment is death-or-death," Valin breathed out, nearing the third floor exit.
"Fine, let's hope mom and dad don't learn about it though. They'd kill me."
"They'd probably kill *me*," Valin continued, rounding the flight of stairs and continuing upwards. "You, they'd just lecture about letting your big brother lead you astray."
"Good point! Thanks for taking the blame, big brother!"
They burst through the roof hatch and into the freezing cold of near-vacuum. The cold, almost airless atmosphere didn't seem to slow the swarm down the slightest, and the black cloud of bugs emerged from the hatch in close pursuit.

The militia station's generators were on the opposite side of the roof, still happily humming as if all was well.
"Here goes nothing!" Valin hastily flipped open one of the access panels and exposed a set of heavy cables. Jysella did the same with her own generator, with the swarms getting dangerously close.
"Good luck!" Jysella yelled through the airless gap between her and her brother.
Valin tilted his head once, then ripped the cables out of their housing with Jedi-enhanced strength. Sparks and electricity arced wildly, but he ignored it and let the cables fizz about on the ground. With the bugs almost on him, Valin grabbed both exposed leads and squeezed his eyes shut.
A lethal jolt of electricity was sent through his body, a white-hot heat that would have flash-fried anyone else. But Valin used his family's unique ability to manipulate energy to absorb and utilize its power for himself. The thousands upon thousands of volts instead manifested itself in an electrical shield all around his body. Immediately he became luminescent, his military-style buzz-cut the only thing that prevented his hair from standing on-end.
Jysella didn't have that luxury, and while she stood within her own electric bubble, her hair stuck out wildly in all directions. Her own jaw was clenched, like Valin, as every ounce of her focus went in to keeping herself from vaporizing.
The swarm of insects that descended upon the two Jedi didn't have the luxury of being non-conductive. Like bugs to a bug-light, the nearly non-existent atmosphere was filled with hiss and pops as thousands of bugs immolated themselves against the Jedi's defenses. Even when they should have pulled back, Valin continued to broadcast an encouragement, and he didn't stop until the last of the insects were a twitching and charred mess on the rooftop.
With a great sigh, both Jysella and Valin relinquished their grips and staggered away from the generator, shaking their hands out on either side of them. Electrical burns were prevalent on the palms of their hands and up their arms, but the two were still very much alive.
"Ouch," Jysella blew on her hands. "Ouch, ouch, ouch."
"That was a bright idea, Valin." Valin gingerly unhooked a compartment on his utility belt and pulled out a roll of bandage. Using his mouth to help him, he wrapped up his hands. "Come here, Sella."
Jysella sent him a pouting look, but obeyed. "Very bright idea, Val."
"At least we're alive," Valin shrugged, wrapping up her hands in the bandage.

"That we are, Mr. Morbid," Jysella said in response to his monotone statement. "Think we can get to Sapphire without any more trouble?"
"Doubt it." Valin went back to rewire the generators. "The fighters that shot us down are still out there somewhere. And if the bugs we just roasted were connected to the Killik hive-mind, then Lomi and Alema will definitely know where we are."
"Well, even if we find another ship, we'll just get shot down again. So that means the only way to Relephon is that hundred-plus kilometer long, unshielded tube," Jysella gestured with a bandaged hand to the tram-way that jutted out from the side of the building. "We're going to need a back-up plan or three."
Valin gazed over the edge of the roof. With a small smile, he looked back to his sister. "I have an idea."
]-)-V-(-[
"You really don't have to feel like you're competing with the Solos you know," Jysella muttered, double-checking the seat-harness.
"I'm not," Valin said over his shoulder, strapped down to the seat in front of his sister. He ran the final checks needed and then sent a prayer through the Force. "Really."
"If you say so."
Valin rolled his eyes at the exasperated tone in his sister's voice. "I do say so, now shush. Would you rather take your chances in the tram?"
"I am *soooo* telling on you," Jysella continued.
"What are you? Ten? It'll work."
"I'll believe that when we come out of this alive."
Valin exhaled slowly and glanced through the window up the tram-way tube. The lights that ran the length of the tube glowed invitingly, looking like a completely tranquil trip to the glittering jewel of Sapphire. The Force, however, was telling him otherwise. He could feel the danger level slowly rise; an unseen threat massing along the outside of the tube.
"All systems are green," Valin read off the console.
"Ready back here too."
"Here goes nothing."
Valin jammed the throttle of the *Miy'til*-class fighter to full, and like a rocket it shot down the tube. Originally part of the militia's defenses, Valin and Jysella had commandeered the fighter and settled it into the tram-way. Their reasoning was that a military-grade starfighter would give them more protection than a cargo tram car if things went awry. And awry things went.
Only a couple of seconds into their flight, the tube began to explode all around them, shattering like a window being pelted with rocks. Valin

rode out the devastation for as long as he could before finally blasting a hole of his own and pushing their fighter through it and into space. There, they could finally see what had shot down the mining trawler they had been in earlier. Almost as if from a bar-room game, two-dozen black, dart-shaped fighters hovered around the remains of the tram-way tube. Each fighter was sleek, pointed in the front, with a narrow cylindrical body, and twisting fins on the back that surrounded a singular ion engine. The creation was clearly mechanical in nature, but the black plating on the dart-shaped fighters looked like slabs of chitin. As the *Miy'til* fighter zoomed past a startled dart-fighter, Valin could see into its bulbous cockpit and saw a Killik warrior not unlike the type he had faced on Terephon.
"Bug-fighters," Valin confirmed with a tilt of his head.
"We're still about a seventy-seven kilometers out from Sapphire," Jysella warned.
"Feel like crashing twice in one day?" Valin asked over his shoulder.
"Don't you dare!"
The shock had worn off and the Killik fighters were now swarming on their tail. Two protrusions at the nose of the Killik fighter were launching rocket-propelled projectiles full of volatile gases. On its own, one fighter might not have been much of a threat. But having over two-dozen fighters fill the void around you with explosions wasn't exactly conducive to one's health. Even if the pilot of the target vehicle was a Jedi.
"Then I could use some ideas here!"
"Wait! Give me navi-computer control."
"It's yours."
"Alema just sent me some coordinates…"
"Alema!"
"We don't have time, just do it!"
Valin bit back another comment, but obeyed, angling their under-siege fighter towards a mountain range on the target moon. An alarm began to blare—a notification that shrapnel had pierced one of the engine housings lit up the command display. Valin diverted power away from the damaged engine and into the shields, but another warning sounded only seconds later.
"Still going to crash," Valin shook his head.
"Think positive."
"Still going to crash, but at least we'll come down in one piece."
"Val!"
"Do *you* want to drive this thing?"

Another explosion and this time the tip of their port wing spun off and away from their ship.
"Losing the deflector shields," Valin said with unnerving calm. He didn't know why, but after being in a crashing ship several times in his life, the very act of being shot down just didn't seem as terrifying as before. "But our vector is set. Even without engines our momentum will take us to those coordinates the Twi'lek sent you."
Another explosion and something else flew away from their fighter.
"Think we should warn someone about the bug-fighters? I mean, those things aren't too effective, but their numbers *can* be dangerous."
"We should have thought of that a few seconds ago, that last blast blew out our comm-relay."
"Joy," Jysella groaned. "Next time you ask to tag along, remind me to say 'no.'"
"How would *you* have gotten to Sapphire?"
"Asked AlGray if I could come over, then go explore until I found Alema," Jysella shrugged. "The cloak-and-dagger stuff is all dad and you."
Their fighter shook once more.
"And we have one engine left."
"This has to be a record."
"And we wonder why those ship companies give the Jedi Order such high insurance numbers every time they loan us a ship."
The ground was coming up fast, and the dart-fighters veered away from the flaming fighter.
"You sure about the coordinates she gave you?" Valin asked, gripping the steering yolk with an increasingly tighter grip.
"No?" Jysella squeaked.
Impact happened a second later, the burning vessel slamming into the side of the mountain with a thunderous crash. Rather than get compacted into a pile of burning scrap metal, however, the mountain side actually gave way. Careening, the *Miy'til*-class fighter pinballed off stalactites and cavern walls, jarring its occupants unpleasantly. Finally, however, it came to a smoking stop at the cavern floor.
Groaning, his vision partially obscured as blood from a cut on his head dripped into his eyes, Valin weakly popped open the canopy and half-pulled himself out of the cockpit seat. A similarly dazed and aching Jysella also undid her safety restraints and rolled out of the fighter and onto the rocky cavern ground. Both their bodies pained them considerably, their still burned hands now having company with gashed faces and arms and a few bruised ribs.

As both Horns shook off the post-crash daze, they began to take note of the organic constructs attached to the cavern walls. Large, circular towers reminiscent of wasp-nests, decorated the chamber. Human-sized worm-like creatures crawled along the ground, seemingly a bit peeved at the loud and violent intruder that had just burst into their nest. Bipedal insects went about their business, ignoring the new arrivals as if they didn't even rate a cursorily glance.
But what caught the attention of the Horns the most was the lone, non-Killik starring at them. A twisted, yet dreamy smile graced the face of Alema Rar as she knelt by their prone forms.
"Welcome to Gorog, Jysella, Valin. We are the Night Herald. We would love to have you Join with us."
]-)-Chapter End-(-[

Tahiri
]-)-I-(-[
Forever changing, that's how she would describe her life, her very identity. For most of the twenty-three years she had been alive though, there had always been one constant. One person she could turn to no matter who she was or how hectic her life had become.
She had once been Tahiri Veila. The name she had been born with. Child of the Sand, Jedi-in-training, best friend of Anakin Solo.
Tahiri Kwaad. The name she had chosen. Human born, Yuuzhan Vong raised, girlfriend of Anakin Solo.
Tahiri Solo. The person she had become. Mother of two, caretaker of the Yuuzhan Vong race, wife of Anakin Solo.
As Tahiri gazed upon the Yuuzhan Vong embassy on Denon, a modest one-story structure within the highly secured Diplomatic Zone, she reflected on her past, present, and future. If someone had told her all those years ago that she'd be married to her childhood best friend and become a central deity to a race of extra-galactic invaders, she'd wonder if they had spent too much time in the desert. But here she was, studiously trying to ignore the fact that they entire embassy staff of thirty had emerged to greet her. As one, the resident priest had them all get down on their knees, and they recited the prayer to Yun-Shuno.
"Please, rise," Tahiri finally said when they began the prayer for the second time. In a way, she was grateful her father-in-law had decided to take Cassa on a joyride in the *Falcon.* The sensitive five-year old never did like it when the Yuuzhan Vong bowed before her.
Most of the staff of the embassy did as bidden, looking at Tahiri not as if she were a goddess, but like some sort of holovid star. Only the truly

religious remained prostrated on hands and knees, refusing to look up. Tahiri supposed that it was an improvement when only six out of thirty stayed prostrated. She clearly remembered the times during the war when it would have been thirty of thirty.
"She-Who-Was-Shaped, you honor us with your presence," the Intendant in charge of the embassy said in hushed tones, wide-eyed and babbling.
Knowing it was useless to protest, Tahiri smiled tightly and nodded. She replied in Yuuzhan Vong, as was habit with her whenever she conversed with members of their race. "[And have you and your men been well, Intendant?]"
"[We have. Your advice, to be modest in the construction of our embassy, proved sound. Two years ago, Prefect Dolbsekh Skell attempted to build a monumental embassy to Yun-Yuuzhan on the planet of Mon Calamari, against your will, and the gods struck it down.]"
"[The gods or extremists who blame the Yuuzhan Vong for the war?]" Tahiri raised an eyebrow. She remembered the report. The prefect had been one of those who 'lost' his religion, like many Yuuzhan Vong had, at the end of the war. Unfortunately this meant that he no longer recognized the Jedi as avatars of the gods. In charge of building one of the first embassies outside of the Core systems, his twenty-story building to the glory of the Yuuzhan Vong race had been completely destroyed. Two heavy tankers of fuel had been driven straight into the building, resulting in the loss of life of everyone inside, including the Prefect.
"[The extremists were the tools of the Yun'o, She-Who-Shapes,]" the embassy's priest answered. "[For we and many others followed your divine instruction, to keep the embassies one level and staffing minimal, and none of those embassies were attacked.]"
"I'm glad to hear that," Tahiri switched to Basic and looked to the Intendant again. "Now, I received word that you wished to see me?"
"Yes, your eminence. A message arrived from Yuuzhan'tar, and it seemed of the utmost urgent in nature," the Intendant switched languages right along with her. His slightly stilted accent, however, revealed that he was one of the many who had taken Basic lessons from C-3PO back during the war.
"Lead the way," Tahiri gestured. She took a step, then stopped, glancing back to the Yuuzhan Vong. Six were still prostrated on the ground with their heads bowed. She directed her attention to the building's priest. "Errr...Savant of Domain Nar, could you please

command the faithful to rise? I promise they won't burst into flame upon seeing me."
The low-level priest, evidently caught up in his own awe at being in the presence of Yun-Shuno's chosen, blinked wildly and looked back to the embassy staff. "[Rise!]" He hissed, looking embarrassed. "[Is the Avatar of Yun-Shuno so unsightly that you cannot look upon her?]"
The question worked, though, and the six hastened to their feet.
"Thanks," Tahiri said sarcastically. She glanced at the six, and her expression softened.
From their lack of scars save for a self-inflicted brand on each of their cheeks, Tahiri could immediately tell that they were of the Extolled caste; the only 'caste' still in existence. After the war, the sudden freedom for the Shamed had not come easily for many of them. Generations of servitude and abuse, an entire society built off their labor, had made it difficult for many to accept their status as 'Freed Ones.'
Many of the Shamed preferred to return to the familiar comfort of service, often begging their former masters to let them continue their servitude under them. There were a few differences, however. The 'sins' of the former Shamed Ones were forgiven by the Yun'o, and though they still toiled and worked for those of higher rank, they had all the protections of a normal Freed One. With their numbers in the hundreds of thousands, the astute Nen Yim had predicted it would probably take several generations for the Extolled caste to disappear completely. The Extolled were a rare sight on Zonama given Taan's efforts. To see six in one place outside of their communal prayer sessions or dwellings was very unlikely. But from the reports, Tahiri knew they were more common in the many diaspora communities that had chosen to stay in the galaxy.
"[Extolled, have you been treated well here?]" Tahiri asked. Most Extolled didn't know Basic, and often didn't even try to learn, believing themselves 'not worthy' of the language of the Jedi.
"[We have, Yun-Shuno,]" murmured one of them, head still bowed submissively. "[Prefect Nar is a strict devotee of the Way of the Jedi and visits your Jedi Temple once a week for guidance. He has declared that if any raise a hand against us, he will cut it off.]"
"[Then the gods are pleased,]" was all Tahiri said. She didn't have a heart to tell the obviously caring prefect that hand-cutting as punishment wasn't exactly part of the Jedi Way. But those sorts of things tended to happen when the Yuuzhan Vong warrior-culture was melded with Jedi teachings. Again she was reminded of the developing

cultural differences between the Yuuzhan Vong on Zonama and those who stayed in the galaxy.
"This way to the villip choir, Avatar of Yun-Shuno," the Intendant motioned politely.
Tahiri followed the Yuuzhan Vong into the orange and purple, circular, coral building. Like a snail's shell, the corridors wrapped around again and again, with rooms situated at naturally occurring intervals. The embassy was a modest sized structure, all of it utilitarian in purpose. There were the living quarters, the dining quarters, and a training room —grown so the embassy's warriors could practice Klu'tok, an old Yuuzhan Vong hand-to-hand combat style that was seeing a resurgence in popularity since most warriors had given up their amphistaffs at the end of the war. There was also a meeting room, the Intendant's office, and the villip chamber.
Tahiri silently hoped that there were no further problems or attacks on Zonama, the galaxy had enough on its plate without any additional Yuuzhan Vong trouble. Led to a room full of villip communicators in the center of the building, the priest and intendant bowed low and left her alone.
She stroked the long-range villip choir and patiently waited as six of the plant-like creatures stood on end and took the forms of Yuuzhan Vong faces.
"What warrants an appearance by the entire Supreme Council?" Tahiri secretly cursed her Solo-luck.
"[*Trouble, Avatar of Yun-Shuno.*]" Caretaker Drathul said succinctly.
"Elaborate."
Caretaker Ne'rai, Drathul's counterpart for the city of Yun-Harla, answered. "[*Public pressure is mounting to retaliate for the attack on Yuuzhan'tar. Supreme Commander Loiric Kaan is gathering support for the revival of the Warmaster position. Naturally he is putting his name forward. With half the Supreme Council dead and Supreme Leader Taan still in a coma, it is all we can do to keep the Shimrraists from seizing control of the cities.*]"
"Of course he would," Tahiri groaned.
"[*The knowledge that the Jedi can do little against the perpetrators for the time being has not helped things either.*]" Caretaker Kal'thir's tone was just a shade short of accusatory. "[*We had to do something to legitimize our leadership, to show that Yuuzhan Vong look out for one and other when even the Jeedai let us down.*]"
"So what did you agree to do?" Tahiri asked cautiously, feeling as if she was scolding her daughter for something after the fact. Then again,

Tahiri reflected wryly, the Yuuzhan Vong government was still in its infant stage.
"[*We agreed to some of Loiric's demands to maintain enough support to hold power,*]"Caretaker Zhul answered.
"[*We're sending a battle group to the main galaxy for the purposes of avenging those who died,*]" Caretaker Rakh summed up.
Tahiri rubbed at the trio of scars on her head, feeling a headache coming. "Okay. Please tell me Loiric's not leading the fleet."
"[*He is not,*]" Ne'rai confirmed, the ghost of a smile on her villip representation indicating her understanding. "[*Despite his attempts to lead the fleet, even we know he adheres more to the old ways than is healthy. No, we've sent the fleet under Supreme Commander Saluup Fing, a disciple of the venerable Nas Choka. He has orders to report to you and cede control of the fleet to you after the travel in darkspace.]"*
"So the fleet will be here in a month?" Tahiri asked—a month being the standard travel time between Zonama and the galaxy.
"[*No, we managed to postpone the fleet's departure using various religious and political maneuvers. Many warriors see this as their last opportunity to go out fighting, so we are having a lottery for those who wish to join the campaign,]"* Ne'rai replied, an ironic glint in her eyes.
"*[The fleet will depart in a month, and since some of the ships are aging, should arrive two months after that.*]"
"Great, thank you for the warning." Tahiri closed her eyes to re-center herself. "Their arrival might actually help out. My husband and his brother recently uncovered a new threat trying to throw the galaxy into chaos. More ships won't hurt."
"[*We are glad it will work out, at least.*]" Drathul harrumphed. "[*We will inform you of any further changes.*]"
"Just one question," Tahiri halted the council. "I noticed it's still only the six of you."
"[*New elections for the empty Caretaker seats are planned for next week*,]" Zhul answered quickly. "[*You may be happy to know that your friend Shaeri is running for the empty Yun-Shuno seat.]"*
"Shaeri, really?" Tahiri brightened at the mention of her Yuuzhan Vong 'little sister.'
"[*Indeed*,]" Rakh, the other Caretaker of Yun-Shuno, nodded.
"That is going to be interesting," Tahiri did not bother to hide her amusement. Both Rakh and Shaeri were about as opposite in opinion and personality as Drathul and Ne'rai were.
"[*You'll forgive me, Jeedai Solo, if I don't pray for her success,]"* Rakh said dourly. As part of Domain Jamaane, it was almost a given that she would be elected.

"You're forgiven." Tahiri looked to each image. "Caretakers, is there anything else I should be informed of?"
"[*A couple of things in development, nothing to concern you at the moment,*]" Caretaker Tsanzi spoke for the first time since the meeting started.
"[*My esteemed colleague shouldn't worry you like that,*]" Drathul said chidingly.
"But she did feel the need to mention it," Tahiri said evenly. "I think I can decide whether it will worry me or not."
Tsanzi's villip image looked to the others, took a deep breath, then spoke again. "[*There are…rumors.*]"
"Of what kind?"
"[*Rumors that Sekot has entered a deep trance,*]" Tsanzi said nervously. "[*No one has seen her since last week, not even during the prayer sessions or school hours. Our priests have tried to commune with her via a qahsa and cognition hood, but she remains silent.*]"
"That doesn't sound good," Tahiri frowned.
"[*There is more,*]" Tsanzi pressed on. "[*Our intelligence network believes that the leader of the Shimrraist movement has surfaced. They believe this individual has the powers of the gods.]"*
"*That* sounds more than a little alarming," Tahiri could feel her heart beat a bit faster. So many hundreds of lightyears away from her 'home' it was maddening not being able to do anything about it. "Do we know who this leader is?"
"[*No. But we believe it is the reason why the Shimrraists have been more organized as of late,*]" Ne'rai said. "[*As Tsanzi said, though, the situation is developing. The public announcement to send the fleet to your galaxy has helped to assuage much of their anger, and the Shimrraists have backed down for now.*]"
"Okay, keep me informed. If the leader can use the Force, and Sekot isn't answering, then something big has to be happening."
"[*Worry about getting justice for those killed in the attack,*]" Drathul directed. "[*We can handle things here…Avatar of Yun-Shuno.*]"
Ignoring his use of her religious title to cover his orders, Tahiri nodded once. "Very well. I'll leave Yuuzhan'tar in your hands."
The villips all reverted with a sigh, and Tahiri let out a sigh of her own as she leaned back in her chair. Between the incoming Vong fleet and trouble on Zonama, the call had been exactly what she had feared. She reached out through the Force to her husband and found his ever comforting presence wrap itself around her. She closed her eyes, smiling faintly at the warmth.

Despite all the new trouble that the call had created, Tahiri was sure of one thing. She would get through it with her best friend, her family, at her side.

]-)-II-(-[

Entering the briefing room silently, Tahiri mouthed a 'sorry' to Anakin and sat down next to him. He handed her a sleeping Jayce, and pulled her against him, kissing the top of her head.

"Bad news?" he whispered.

"We're going to have a Yuuzhan Vong fleet," Tahiri whispered back with a smirk, feeling playful despite everything. Anakin, and their son, just had that sort of affect on her.

He took the news in stride, playing along with her. "What shall we name it?"

Tahiri just shook her head. She knew his mind was already working overdrive to include this new information into whatever he was planning. "We can decide on that later, what did I miss?"

"They just finished going over the anatomy of the Killik variants," Anakin murmured, using his head to gesture to a group of seated scientists. "According to records, the Killiks had absorbed at least a dozen different insect species over the course of history. A couple of others were raised up and harvested to be part of the nest."

As the present speaker finished—he had been going over locations of possible Killik-infected worlds—his next announcement attracted Tahiri's attention. "And now to speak about their progress on Joiner research, Yuuzhan Vong Master Shaper Nagme."

The aged, unorthodox Shaper tilted her head politely and took center stage. "In analysis of the material recovered by Galactic Alliance Intelligence, we are quite certain of how the Joining affects multiple species. To that end, we are working on a dovin basal-droid hybrid that will emit a counter-signal to disrupt the electronic control utilized by Killik nests. We are concurrently breeding a dozen of these modified dovin basals, and with accelerated growing, they will be ready for the field in another week. As shown in the diagram behind me, they can be mounted to standard speeders or Yuuzhan Vong pack beasts and have an effective range directly correlative to its size—which in another week will mean have a kilometer or so. Upon full maturity, in two months, they should have a range of two kilometers, but my team is under the impression that time is of the essence."

"Much appreciated," General Farlander nodded.

"We have also synthesized a more potent form of the chemical used by GA Intelligence to counteract the chemical effects, one that has been converted into aerosol form. When utilized in tandem with the jammer

we are building, it should render most Joiners…for lack of a better word…un-Joined. Anakin Solo, if you would explain the last aspect of this Joining."
Tahiri squeezed her lover's hand in support, watching him go up with a grim smile. Despite the room being filled with seasoned military officials, scientists, Jedi, politicians, and other individuals involved in the coming operation, he didn't look at all ruffled. Then again, after staring down a legion of heavily armed, armored, and scarred Yuuzhan Vong warriors determined to continue to fight a war already lost, a room full of un-armed people in cloth clothing hardly seemed challenging in comparison.
"Thank you, Master Shaper," Anakin said smoothly. "Generals, admirals, ministers, Masters, scientists. You've heard how Joining works on a biological level, but there is an added complication to this. During the attack on the Senate two weeks ago, my brother and myself managed to detect a Force-presence guiding the creatures. This Force-presence was familiar to us because we had encountered it nearly nine years ago above Myrkr."
A hologram emerged from the central projector.
"This is dark Jedi Lomi, her partner Welk, and missing and presumed dead Jedi Raynar Thul. All three had disappeared after the Myrkr mission, and they somehow have now re-emerged as the Killik colony's central decision makers. The Killiks themselves appear to be natural receptors for Force energy, allowing these three individuals to channel their will using not only standard Joining methods, but with the Force as well."
"So what are you saying?" A military officer asked.
"Put it simply, though Master Shaper Nagme's breakthroughs will help control the Joiner threat, we won't be able to free the Joiners completely unless Lomi, Welk, and Raynar are somehow neutralized. After consulting with my siblings, we are quite certain that Lomi is in the Hapes Cluster. It is why the Jedi Order acted unilaterally in sending aid, and why my brother is over there instead of giving this briefing. Welk's location is almost definitely in the Vagaari homesystem, as confirmed by my sister via Force-meditation. This leaves Raynar Thul, who is almost certainly hiding on this planet."
"How certain are you of this?" Jedi Master Barratk'l asked.
"If not on this planet, then in this system," Anakin answered. "But we have reason to believe that the 'Colony' criminal syndicate is a front for Joiner activities, and Denon has the strongest Colony presence in several systems."

"The fact that the pheromone pods were found in Colony bases also indicates this," Director of Intelligence Belindi Kalenda agreed.
"So we track down Raynar and we end the problem?" a voice from the audience asked.
"In a way, yes," Anakin replied. "We attempt to convince the hive mind that their course of action will lead to their destruction. If that fails, removing Lomi, Welk, and Raynar from the hive mind should be enough to force the Killiks to revert to their passive nature. I've already talked with the Jedi Masters, and they're fully onboard for what is needed to be done. Failing that, we have to root out the Killiks system by system to ensure they don't develop any more strongholds. General Jamiro, I think this is your part of the briefing."
The leader of the Galactic Alliance Special Forces, acknowledged Anakin with a friendly nod. Getting into his fifties, the life-long soldier regarded the familiar and new faces all around him amicably. "As Jedi Anakin Solo has said, much of our operation will take place in the Denon undercity. GASF strike teams backed by Jedi will launch simultaneous attacks on Colony bases scattered throughout the planet. At the same time, Admiral Niathal, several Jedi Masters, and the Galactic Alliance Army will be on station throughout systems suspected of being compromised, should the Killiks try anything. This operation will be a tricky one as we'll be using the Jedi to coordinate actions in Wild Space and the Hapan Consortium.
Our primary target is the former Jedi Raynar Thul. Jedi Anakin Solo and his wife Tahiri have both agreed to lead the Jedi taskforce assigned with tracking him down. Jedi from the Jedi Temple of Denon have also agreed to help out in this mission. Despite the fact that we are capable of neutralizing Joiners, there is a high possibility that the Killiks may have weakened the foundations of the buildings above. Civil authorities have been discretely notified of this danger and are making preparations should the worst occur."
"Is this a capture or kill mission, sir?" The now Colonel Judder Page asked. Similarly a career soldier, he had remained in command of the Katarn Commandos after the war. Though he wasn't as active in the field, his expertise had helped the Commandos maintain a staggering ninety-five percent success rate with minimal casualties against the pirates and other organized criminals they went up against.
"As this will be under the auspices of the Jedi, it will be a capture mission. Jedi Solo, would you like to explain more?"
"I can, sir," Anakin nodded, stepping forward again. "During the discussions with the Jedi Masters, the issue regarding Raynar Thul came up. As he is still a Jedi, one merely confused by the Joining, his

termination was immediately ruled out. Not wanting to be hypocritical, the Council came to the decision that Lomi and Welk are to be taken alive, if possible, as well. We Jedi believe that every life is sacred, so if we can save their lives we will. From a tactical stand-point, if Raynar, Lomi, and Welk are part of the hive mind, we might have a better chance of communicating with the Killiks with them alive. As part of a the goals set by Senator Jacen Solo, we need to figure out just why the Killiks are doing what they're doing, otherwise this might happen again regardless of what we do."
"Any more questions?" General Jamiro asked.
"Rules of combat?" Trey Courser of Wraith squadron verbalized.
"Whenever possible, stun and disable the Joiners," General Jamiro replied. "I am told that Danni Quee and her division are working on darts used to deliver the GA Intel's serum."
Danni, from her seat, nodded. "It's simply a matter of conversion. We're repurposing the amphistaff anti-venom darts for this matter. We've also completed a prototype of a Yuuzhan Vong bio-tech variation for large crowds."
"For the bugs, that's another matter. Again I'll defer to the Jedi Order."
"It may seem like a double standard, but going up against a hive-mind is a lot different than most enemies," Anakin elaborated. "I'm sure if my brother were here he could explain it better, but basically, there is no sense of individuality for most of the Killiks. They are in essence, drones the hive uses to fulfill its goals. Until we convince the hive mind, Lomi, Welk, and Raynar, not to attack, the Killiks will do their best to kill us. In that matter, we will have no choice but to respond in kind."
"Do the Jedi Masters approve of this stance?" Justice Minister Ta'laam Ranth asked, eyes in the room darting to the Jedi congregation.
"Unfortunately, yes," Tresina Lobi bowed her head slightly. "We cannot ask the men and women of the Galactic Alliance to risk their lives against a threat that will have no compulsion to show them mercy. Whereas the Joiners were trapped into their choices, history shows that the Killiks are fully cognizant and actively do their best to serve their hive. It is our hope we can get to the three Force-sensitives responsible before Killik loss of life becomes egregious."
"I now cede the floor to General Nek Bwua'tu, who will elaborate on the navy's role in this operation."
After the Bothan general explained the multi-system campaign, the briefing quickly devolved into particulars, and Anakin came back to sit down next to Tahiri. A general strike date was decided to coincide with both Jacen and Tenel Ka's assault on Lomi's Killik forces, and Jaina's

movements with the Vagaari. For setting up a trans-galactic battle plan that hinged on mystical telepathic abilities, it came together pretty well.
Tahiri only kept half an ear out, willing to let Anakin fill in the details. Not that she wasn't interested. But tired after the morning meeting, and basking in the glow of her family, Tahiri allowed her eyes to flutter close, her expression soft and loving as she communicated her emotions through the Force. She could feel Anakin's constant presence add to that, and Tahiri smiled up at him.
He leaned back, his attention seemingly focused on the briefing, but his Force presence enfolding both her and Jayce in a protective shell of emotion.
The briefing slowly ended, the squadron leaders, Jedi, scientists, and politicians all departing or sticking around to share a word with one and other. The young couple took that time to leave the room. Time for being the galactic hero was temporarily done, now was the time for their family.
]-)-III-(-[
"Mommy!" Cassa called out brightly.
"Hey, you," Tahiri giggled, sweeping up her daughter in a whirling hug.
"Grandpa Solo took me up on his ship!" Cassa exclaimed, to the amusement of the adults present. "But he got mad at me when I called his ship dumb."
"Oh?" Tahiri arched an eyebrow at the man in question.
"Uh huh," Cassa continued on. "I tried to speak to the *Falcon*, but it's all computers and metal. Not even a droid brain. Not like the *Veila.* When I asked grandpa how come the ship was so dumb, he got all grumpy-faced. It was funny. Then he said that if I wanted to talk to computers I should go ask Threepio about the ship. When I asked if that meant Threepio was smarter than the *Falcon*, he made this face." Cassa mimed a mouth opening and closing, her finger pointed outwards in a paused motion.
"I'm sure," Tahiri tried to hide her laughter. Despite his projected emotions, it was very clear that Han had enjoyed the flight with his granddaughter. "You see, your grandpa is very…"
"Watch it," Han wagged a finger.
"Attached to his ship," Tahiri finished with a giggle.
"Right, I was trying to tell her that things don't need a heartbeat to be alive," Han proclaimed. "It's in the hum of her engines, the way the throttle will stick if you leave it on full for too long, the wiring, it's all one of a kind. Just like any person. The *Falcon*'s no more a YT-1300 freighter than a Jawa is an Ewok. Same size, but different everything."

"Like I said," Tahiri mock-whispered. "Attached."
"Now I see where she gets it from," Han rolled his eyes.
"Enjoy your trip, dad?" Tahiri remarked, her comment throwing Han off.
Han smiled a rueful, goofy grin and laughed. "Yeah, your kid there catches on quick. Soon I'll have her flying just like I did my kids. You know, training those crack pilots one generation at a time."
"And you wondered why your wife warned me about you," Tahiri chuckled fondly. "Thanks for looking after Cassa."
"Hey, it's my pleasure," Han said it like he meant it. "You get that serious meeting out of the way?"
"The operation will begin at the end of the month."
"Take care of yourself then, I mean it."
"Will do, General Solo, sir," Tahiri saluted while carrying Cassa in the other arm. "How's the political stuff going? I know you and Leia are still trying to work out something with Master Hamner."
"Slowly," Han replied, disconnecting the fuel nozzle from the *Falcon* and closing the landing ramp. "Hamner is still convinced that the way to go is putting the Jedi in charge of everything. He seems to think your Force will give us all the answers. The fact that the Jedi are taking the lead on the anti-Killik stuff has actually gotten a few senators to switch sides. But you don't really want to hear about this political stuff do you? "
"Good point." Tahiri fell into stride alongside him, her daughter resting her head against her chest. "So what's it like?"
"Huh?"
"You know, someone your age getting back into the same messes you got into when you were my age?" Tahiri asked impishly.
"My age?"
"I meant, someone of your generation of esteemed knowledge and experience," Tahiri bantered. Having never had a father-figure in her life outside of Kam Solusar, she enjoyed the way Han prioritized his family whenever he could. He might not be Force-sensitive, but his care for his family was reflected in his comforting presence in the Force.
"That's sounds a lot better," Han said drolly. They took the turbolift down to the taxi-level. "Really, you don't have to pick up the slack just because my other two daughters are on opposite sides of the galaxy."
"Jaina and Tenel Ka are very big shoes to fill. And you know how I feel about filling shoes."
"I've noticed," Han replied, glancing at both Cassa and Tahiri's bare feet pointedly. "Don't your feet ever get cold?"

"Nuh uh. Perks of being a Jedi, don't have to wear socks or shoes to keep your feet toasty warm," Cassa piped up.
"That's right," Tahiri laughed, kissing her daughter on the top of her head. "The Force helps us out."
"All the mystical power in the galaxy and you Jedi use it as a feet-warmer," Han shook his head in disbelief. Despite his words, he was smiling all the way. "So, what's next for you high and mighty Jedi?"
"Master Skywalker invited us to dinner at their apartment."
"Luke?"
"No, Mara. Don't forget, she was my master for a part of the war. A couple others of our family will be there too."
"Right," Han scratched the back of his head, looking askance.
"Is there something wrong?"
"No, nothing, not really," Han smiled and waved her off.
"Talking to a Jedi here," Tahiri said lightly. By now she was used to Anakin's 'I'm fine' and 'its okays' to know when he wasn't 'fine and okay.'
"I'm just feeling my age, that's all," Han breathed, his face looking worn. He opened the speeder door for Tahiri and then got in after her. "Doesn't help that I have to keep up with all you Jedi running about, not everyone can use the Force to make themselves feel better. A part of me is glad Leia delayed her Jedi training."
Tahiri cocked her head to the side, trying to untangle the complex emotions coming from her husband's father. When her eyes briefly darted to his face, she could tell by his raised eyebrows that he was aware of what she was doing, and she looked away, blushing. "Sorry about that."
"It's okay," Han chuckled softly, almost sadly. He started the speeder and joined the seemingly never-ending lane of traffic. "Might be better if you just do your Jedi thing and figure out what I'm thinking. Even *I* don't know what I'm thinking."
"You don't need to be a Jedi to make the galaxy a better place," Tahiri said softly. "Sure, it gives us an unfair advantage, but there are lots of others who do the same job, sometimes even do it better. If all those stories are to be believed, you did your own part in blowing up Death Stars and taking down warlords."
"That was all luck," Han shook his head.
"And we have the Force," Tahiri shrugged, gesturing to Cassa and herself.
"When did you get so wise and Jedi-y?" Han mock-scowled.
"You try arguing with a sentient planet for several years," Tahiri retorted. "After decades with only the Ferroans as its friends, Sekot

had to get used to having an entire race view it as a deity. Some even called it Yun-Yuuzhan, the living embodiment of Yuuzhan'tar."
"And what would you have to argue with a planet about?" Han said in disbelief. "Though, now that I think of it, I bet it had to do with the Vong."
"Yuuzhan Vong!" Cassa piped up.
"Yuuzhan Vong," Han corrected himself, smiling at the mini-Tahiri clinging to her mother.
"Yes," Tahiri grinned. "It had to do with them. You see, this was the first time Sekot had truly been treated like a god. The Ferroans had been on Zonama before it had gained sentience and had been its teacher. Now it's Sekot's turn to teach, and Anakin and I debated on just how much we should guide the Yuuzhan Vong development. I mean, coming from a relatively stable galaxy, we know what works and what doesn't. Does it help the Yuuzhan Vong more if we guide them away from the mistakes we made? Or should we let them make those same mistakes knowing that it might slow their progress and risk having them fall back to their warring ways, but help them learn all the while? The big question, however, was, should Anakin, myself, and Sekot use our godly status to be interactive deities, or should we be 'godly' from a distance, if that makes any sense."
Han blinked very slowly, digesting Tahiri's spiel, and then scratching his head. "So, what did you mighty deities decide on at the end?"
"We couldn't," Tahiri shrugged simply. "On one hand, being a Jedi prohibits us from abusing the religious beliefs of another culture, or misleading them, to make change the way *we* want it to go. On the other, we have a chance to truly affect the Yuuzhan Vong for good, but doing so would only cement their images of us as gods."
"Almost like what's going on with the rest of the galaxy," Han said astutely. "Most people saw the Jedi as saviors and fixer-uppers after the war. The Jedi tried to meet that image, and got themselves in an even bigger mess because of it."
"Yeah, but in this case, Anakin and I had to deal with a sentient planet who was scared of making the wrong decision and forever scarring the Yuuzhan Vong development."
"Scared, sentient planets, now I've heard everything," Han breathed. "And you wonder why I worry about keeping up with you Jedi."
"You're doing a good job so far. Plus, I might be a little biased, but you raised three good Jedi too."
Han smiled distantly. "Yeah, they came out okay."

Their speeder pulled into the apartment parking lot, and the trio were greeted by an awaiting Mara, Luke, Anakin, Jayce, Ben and Kani, Janek, Threepio, Artoo, and a tired looking Leia.
"Hey all!" Tahiri chirped brightly. Cassa wiggled herself out of her mother's arms to run to give Anakin a hug. Anakin in turn traded children, passing Tahiri the two-and-a-half month old Jayce.
"Hello," Mara laughed warmly. "Great that you could make it.
Tahiri beamed back. "Wouldn't have missed a family meal for all the stars in the galaxy."
"What she said, but probably for different reasons," Han added, causing his wife to roll her eyes.
"It's been too long since we could all sit down and eat with you, Tahiri, Anakin," Leia said tenderly. "It better not be another seven years until the next dinner together."
"It won't be," Anakin reassured his mother.
"Too bad Cousin Jacen and Jaina couldn't be here too," Ten year old Ben Skywalker spoke up. "Then the Solo-Skywalkers would *all* be here."
"They're with us in spirit, I'm sure," Mara rubbed Ben's shoulder.
"Come on, let's get back to the apartment. I tried out some of Kam's recipes, and I think the food came out close enough to edible to be enjoyable."
With a warm and happy atmosphere suffusing the family, the group turned and enjoyed a brief respite before the storm.
]-)-IV-(-[
Standing out on the balcony of their apartment, an apartment acquired when it became clear they would be in the galaxy for quite some time, Tahiri reveled in the feel of Anakin's arms around her, her head resting on his chest. The sky was cloudy, the light pollution turning it a hellish orange that made it seem as if it were on fire. Below, a low level of smog refracted the light even further, distorting neon greens, blues, oranges, pinks, and all manner of colors in an almost opaque mat of color. The distant sounds of speeders zooming by, holo-advertisements still hawking their wares, mechanical clunks and whirs, it was a far cry from what they had gotten used to.
Illuminated by the orange glow from outside, Tahiri just closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of Anakin's hand running up and down her back with loving care.
"Are you okay?" Tahiri whispered softly, knowing he was taking as much comfort from her as she was from him.
"Actually, yes," Anakin murmured, resting his head atop hers. "I thought I'd miss it, you know, Zonama."
"You don't?"

"Not as much as I thought I would. It was peaceful, tranquil. The problems were actually manageable. Life was simple, wake up, take Cassa to school, help out in whichever settlement needed my divine knowledge, and so on. But…"
"It wasn't you," Tahiri said knowingly.
"Yeah," Anakin sighed. "Maybe it's because I was conditioned as a young kid that I was meant for something 'great.' I don't know. The last thing I wanted to do was get thrown back into the spotlight. We've only been back a month and a half, and already I have hundreds of thousands of people preparing an operation across a galaxy in coordination with Jacen and Jaina. So much more could go wrong this time."
"It'll work out," Tahiri voiced softly. This was the Anakin no one else but she would see. The Hero-Boy who doubted his abilities and questioned his decisions because of the fear that they just wouldn't be good enough, be the right choices for the problem at hand. Others saw him as an inspiring leader who pulled miracles out of thin air. But to her, he would always be her oh so flawed best friend first and foremost, and she wouldn't have it any other way.
"That's actually what I'm afraid of," Anakin said wryly. "Everything works according to plan, then what? The galaxy will see that the plan was Jedi-led. Will see that a Jedi, me specifically—since things didn't start changing until I got back, never mind that I only worked with several dozen others to nail out the plan—stepped in to do what the entire Senate and armed-forces couldn't do in five years. My actions affect more than just how the galaxy looks at me now. I mean, if things go right or wrong, you, Cassa, Jayce, they'll all be thrown into the spotlight with me. We're lucky we even have this moment right now and…mphf."
Tahiri drew back from the quick kiss. "There, that's better. Me and Cassa are the ones that talk in paragraphs, not you, Hero-Boy."
"You don't talk in paragraphs."
"Oh?"
"You don't," Anakin stressed with an earnest nod. "They're more like nonstop streams of thought."
"'Nonstop streams of thought'? Are you trying to tell me something, Hero-Boy?"
"You know, you're right. I think I'm going to stop talking now."
"Bright idea." Tahiri rested her head back against his chest.
"I'm fighting for us, you know," Anakin said after a moment of silence. He glanced back through the open balcony doors towards the room his

children shared. "For you, for Cas and Jayce. So they don't have to do the same things we had to do when they become teens."
"It's a nice thought," Tahiri murmured, a pang in her heart. She knew what Anakin was feeling all too well, and knew that it would probably be one wish even their super-powered bond couldn't grant.
"Too optimistic?"
"I just remember your mom mentioning to me once, back during the war, how it all wasn't supposed to be like it was," Tahiri said, her voice softer as she recalled the conversation. "It was before the final battle over Coruscant. She said that she had fought against the Empire and all those Sithy people for you and Jacen and Jaina. That she wanted to fight those battles so you wouldn't have to, so you would have a normal childhood. You know it hurt her so much that she wasn't able to do that? That you had to fight anyways despite everything she gave to this galaxy, sacrificing family time for politics, bedtime for battles. She *so* wanted you and Jacen and Jaina to be…well…I guess a normal Jedi is kind of a contradiction…but she wanted you three to have a normal childhood, not like hers. She's your mother, but there were some things even she couldn't protect you from. No one knows that better than her, and it still hurts her to this day."
"I…I've never picked up on anything," Anakin frowned. "How come she hasn't said anything to me, or Jacen, or Jaina?"
"Because she's proud of what the three of you have become despite her inability to shield you from an intergalactic war, dummy," Tahiri chided softly. "You became your own people, have your own lives. Isn't that what any parent wants for their kids? To see them grow up and be happy and successful?"
Anakin nodded silently, Tahiri momentarily losing her read on his emotions. "Do you think it's possible, to clear the galaxy of galactic troubles in our generation so Cassa and Jayce won't have to deal with them?"
"We can only hope, Hero-Boy," Tahiri whispered, reaching up to gently caress his face. She knew he knew the truth and just needed her to confirm it. "But I'll be with you every step of the way, doing my hardest to make damned sure Cassa and Jayce have a galaxy worth living in when they grow up."
Anakin kissed her softly, and Tahiri just closed her eyes, basking in the emotions she could feel resonate in their bond. "You're amazing, Tahiri Solo."
"You're not too bad yourself, Anakin Solo," Tahiri whispered back. "Ready for tomorrow?"

"We finally get to actually see just how the Jedi Order has been these past seven years," Tahiri nodded. "Think the new generation will be up to carrying out your crazy plans?"
"They'll learn," Anakin shrugged.
"Steep learning curve."
"Not my fault, blame the galaxy."
"Come on, Hero-Boy. Let's go to bed. Even heroes need their sleep after all." Taking one of his hands, Tahiri tugged him back towards their apartment. With one last long look at the Denon vista, Anakin followed. Both mentally prepared themselves from what was to come, knowing that peace was about to become a rare commodity once more.
]-)-V-(-[
"[The Yavin and Denon Praxeum Jedi are assembling as ordered,]" Death Knight Toile Senn reported. Below the balcony, over thirty Jedi were lining up in neat rows, the earthen tones of their Jedi robes causing them to appear as one brown mass.
Eyeing the gathering Jedi, Anakin, in a low voice, learned over to Tahiri. "Were we ever that young?"
"Lifetimes ago, maybe," Tahiri answered, feeling a similar sense of bewilderment. Most of those forming up were merely teenagers, some not even fifteen yet. A third were probably as weak in the Force as Danni Quee was.
"Most of the older Knights and Masters are still on assignment throughout the galaxy. The praxeums and temple had to call on their reserves for this mission," Death Knight Maika explained, only a few months over eighteen herself. "Toile and I were the only Death Knights left on Yavin, and that's only because an old injury keeps me from participating in the more dangerous missions."
"We're training to assault a massive insect hive underneath Denon, you can't get any more dangerous than that," Anakin tilted his head curiously.
"That's what I said," a new voice joined in. "I see the rumors were true. The 'Salvation' of the Jedi Order has returned."
Tahiri and Anakin looked in the direction of the speaker and froze. Standing a few steps behind them, his scarred face impassive, was the bald leader of the Death Knights, Waxarn Kel.
"Hey Master! I thought you had Yavin business. Coming along with us after all?" Maika asked perkily.
"Anakin knows why I'm coming along," Waxarn said in cool, even tones, raising a single eyebrow at Anakin. "I've learned long ago not to entrust those I care about to…others."

Maika and Toile looked back and forth between the two, a current of unreadable emotions streaming back and forth.
"It'll be good to have you along, Waxarn," Anakin said softly. "Glad you could make it."
"It's Jedi Master Kel now. There have been quite a few changes since you packed up and left."
"We've all changed," Anakin replied evenly. "Amazing what seven years of reflection can do to someone."
Waxarn smiled curtly and held out his hand. "I look forward to seeing some of those changes, Solo. This crazy venture should prove… interesting."
"Interesting is hardly the word would use," Anakin inclined his head briefly. "Hope things turn out better than last time."
"Like last time, Jedi Knight Solo. I'll work with you. Just keep my apprentices alive."
"No promises."
"Wasn't expecting any," Waxarn returned. "It should be enlightening, working alongside you again."
"Agreed." Deftly changing topics before Waxarn's apprentices could pick up anything too deep from their master, Anakin gestured to his side. "You know my wife, Tahiri Solo."
"You married him? Congratulations."
"Thank you," Tahiri responded amicably. "You've been well?"
"As well as one can expect this day and age," Waxarn inclined his head politely. "I'll be in the audience."
"Waxarn," Anakin called out before the older Jedi turned to leave.
"Anakin?"
"Thank you, for everything."
Waxarn's expression softened. "They didn't die for nothing, Solo. See to it that it stays that way."
"We'll be working on creating a Battle Meld, we could use your help."
"I'll be an anchor," Waxarn said. "Any chance we can give to those kids out there is a chance they might not have had otherwise."
"You can go ahead and join him," Anakin directed the two other Death Knights.
When they were gone, Tahiri stepped forward and slipped one of her hands into his. She could tell Anakin was visibly shaken coming face to face with one of his ghosts of the war. Her head was tilted back slightly, concern flickering across her face.
"I'll be okay. Have to be," Anakin responded bravely to her unasked question.
"Dummy."

"Yup."
Their footsteps seemed to stretch on forever as they made their way down the stairs and towards the largest of the Denon Temple's training room. Waiting for them at the door to the room was Klin-Fa, Uldir, and Republic-era Jedi Deran Nelual.
"Ready?" Klin-Fa asked with a game smile.
"Have to be," Tahiri sounded back.
"You have the full support of the Denon Temple," Deran said gently. "Even the non-Jedi soldiers and staff are backing you."
"I know," Anakin acknowledged. "And thanks. Your maps of the Old City have made planning the attack possible."
"Not quite what we had in mind for them when we drew them up though," Deran said with an ironic lilt in her voice. "They were meant to chart routes to deliver aid, not to wage war."
They pushed open the double doors, and the Jedi in the room snapped to attention. Waxarn Kel was sitting with a group of other Jedi Masters off to the side; a group that included Luke, Mara, Kam Solusar, Cilghal, Tekli, Kyp Durron, Octa Ramis, and High Council members Barratk'l and Tresina Lobi.
"I know I missed quite a few things over the years," Anakin said in a low voice to the Denon Temple staff, eyes darting to the crowd as he stood just out of view. Eager young faces stared upwards at the stage, awaiting his arrival with baited breath. "And the Death Knights said the other Jedi were on assignment. But these are all kids."
"Brilliant idea of the politicians and higher-ups," Uldir said sarcastically. "Our generation turned out so swell despite fighting an inter-galactic war in our teenage years, so they wanted to continue the tradition."
"Ah."
"You *are* keeping the kids behind the front lines, right?" Klin-Fa's voice was terse.
"The lightsecond I saw how young they were I changed the plans," Anakin confirmed. Tahiri could 'hear' his thoughts and knew he was imagining Cassa and Jayce grown up and out there in the crowd of young Jedi.
She could also sense the surface thoughts of many of the teens in the crowd. They had subsisted on stories of the Yuuzhan Vong War, seen the holovids about the founder of their Order's current incarnation and his adventures. Tionne's stories broadcasted through each of the praxeums were often their 'evening entertainment.' Many were orphans, determined to find their place in the galaxy, others had the pressure of their family expecting something from them. Jedi were

renown through the war and they had to step up and be counted among their number.
Nervous anticipation, excitement at finally being able to join the Jedi Knights and Masters of old, the chance to make a true difference; Tahiri felt them all and had to smile sadly. It wasn't all too long ago when she and Anakin had felt the same. It was what had driven him to take charge of the Myrkr mission, what had pushed him to the breaking point as events became all too real.
She and Anakin knew better now. Knew better than anyone what the frontlines were like, what it was like to lose close friends, family, and feel their deaths echo in the Force. Had they been teens and the Killik crisis popped up, the mission would have seemed to them to be an exciting adventure. A chance to prove oneself and put their training to good use.
But the reality was much harsher, she and Anakin knew it, all the older Jedi in the room did.
"Hi all, I'd like to thank you all for coming," Anakin began with a smile pasted on his face. Tahiri could feel his anxiety, something that came from the knowledge that he was now responsible for the lives of all these…kids. "If you don't know, I'm Anakin Solo, unofficial commander of the Jedi contingent for this mission. For some of you, this might be your first big mission, the one you've been dreading or waiting for. For others, you might see this as your time to shine, or fear what is to come. Those emotions are okay, vent them in the coming days so you'll be solely focused on the mission when the time comes.
Operation Dark Nest will take place at the end of the month, that's fifteen days to brush up our skills and learn about each other's strengths and weaknesses. For the most part, we'll be acting as coordinators for the spec-ops and army units on the frontlines. Given the sheer number of enemies we might face, it's been agreed that we Jedi will be more useful employing Battle Meditation, healing, and other similar Force abilities. The more we can do with the few we have, the better."
There were several spikes of disappointment, quickly hidden, but definitely noticeable. Anakin continued on, gazing kindly on the young crowd.
"There will be a few exceptions, however. Master Kel, his apprentices, and a few others will be chosen to work with Tahiri and I in tracking down and apprehending Raynar Thul. Another group, those that specialize in mind-manipulation, will be trained up to help shield your fellow Jedi from any Killik mental attacks. It's already been proven that the Killik swarms act as an extension of Raynar, Lomi, and Welk's Force

abilities, so this third unit will be vital in holding the lines. Are there any questions?"
A hand went up from the Yavin IV delegation. "Jedi Knight Solo, will there be other Knights and Masters on this mission besides Master Kel, Klin-Fa, and you and Ms. Solo?"
Anakin attempted to sound cheerful as he answered. "Nope, the fate of the galaxy rests on your shoulders so to speak. Operation Dark Nest is a complicated operation that spans over sixty systems all throughout the galaxy. In addition to Denon and the Hapes Cluster, intel has picked up the significant presence of Killiks on the Verpine, Fefze, Vratix, Yam'rii, and several other homesystems. To prevent this galaxy's native insectoid races from becoming part of the Killik collective, other teams are being dispatched there as well. So that leaves the Colony bases on this planet for us. But you've all trained to be protectors of this galaxy, trust in your own abilities, in that of your friends. The battle-meld you'll learn in the coming day will also be of great help. Don't worry about making the stuffy old Masters proud, worry about making yourself proud and surviving this. We work together, we can get this done, I'm sure of it."
Words laced with the Force straightened the backs of some of those in the audience, filling their hearts with courage and determination. They were Jedi, and that meant something to the galaxy. Grim smiles, affirmative nods, the over thirty Jedi were with Anakin to the end. As if knowing this, Anakin smiled sadly.
"Let's get to work then. Jedi Masters Klin-Fa Gi and Waxarn Kel will divide you up based on your abilities and you'll begin to learn a couple of Force-techniques you'll be using a lot in the coming days. May the Force…be with you all."
With his eyes locking onto a baby-faced apprentice in the front row—who earnestly looked up back at him with youthful blue-green eyes—the customary Jedi benediction nearly got stuck in his throat.
While Waxarn and Klin-Fa began calling out names, Anakin stepped off the dais and approached the young Jedi Apprentice. "Hi."
Young eyes went round, and she blushed profusely. "Hi, Jedi Knight Solo. You really had a great speech. Sorry for staring but you're a lot taller than your holos. Cuter too. Bantha dung, did I really just say that? Oh gods, I'm…"
"Deep breath," Anakin coached, and she reflexively did as told. Tahiri stepped up to his side and did her best not to laugh. Holed up with all sorts of Jedi Masters, politicians, and soldiers, it was sometimes easy to forget how the rank-and-file Jedi viewed them. "So, what's your name?"

"Hedda, sir. Apprentice Hedda, no last name, at least that I know of. Thirteen years old, half Balosar, half human, out of the Denon Temple. Only just discovered I was a Jedi last year when Jedi Knight Tainer found me on Tion. It's been real cosmic since, but Klin-Fa tells me I pick up things pretty fast and should be able to go to Ossus or Yavin soon. I think I'll go to Ossus though, I like looking after the young ones here at the Temple. I did it back at the orphanage on Tion, so I kind of like helping them out."
Anakin took in her spiel with a patient smile. For someone used to his wife and daughter's 'trains of thought,' listening to the star-struck young teen was a piece of cake. "That's great to hear. Ossus can definitely use more protectors. You said you were thirteen?"
"Yes sir, I think I'm the youngest one here. You're not going to stick me behind the lines, are you? I'm…"
"Nah, you'll be with Tahiri and my unit, jumping head-first into danger," Anakin continued his friendly banter. Despite that, Tahiri could sense his desire to protect the young soul, and it matched her own. Though she had antennapalps, Hedda had fair skin, curly blond hair, and with her chattery ways, could easily be a Cassa grown up. Given that she was also the youngest present, their resolve was only further strengthened.
"Really? I get to work with *the* Anakin Solo and *the* Tahiri Solo?" Hedda's eyes bulged. "Astral! Beyond Astral! I studied your holocrons, did you know that! It really helped, not thinking of the Force as light or dark, but as just one big thing."
"I'm glad," Anakin laughed genuinely. "I notice you have quite the unique lightsaber."
"Oh this?" Hedda held up an aged-looking, non-traditional lightsaber. The metal casing was worn to a dull sheen, a leather strap at the base allowed it to wrap around the user's wrist. "The orphanage director said it was my grandma's. You see, grandma was a Jedi and she met grandpa during the Clone Wars."
"Your grandfather was a soldier?"
"No, he was in charge of refugees fleeing the conflict to the Outer Rim," Hedda answered brightly. "He used to be a deathstick dealer before the war, but an encounter with another Jedi convinced him to go home and rethink his life. After a brief stint as an arms-dealer, he packed up after the war and made his way out to Tion, and that's where he met grandma."
"How do you know all this?" Tahiri asked curiously.

"Oh, I have grandma's journals," Hedda said. "Well, I have them now. Jedi Tainer's apprentice, Kyrelle found them first and they tracked me down to give them to me."
"It's great you know so much about your past," Tahiri smiled. Over the thirteen year old's head, she met Klin-Fa's eyes. The Denon Temple instructor tilted her head slightly in acknowledgment, looking relieved.
Look after her, Vong-Girl.
Will do, Master Gi.
Klin-Fa made a face at the official-sounding nature of her title.
You're welcome, Jedi Knight Solo.
Rub it in why don't you.
I intend to.
You know Anakin and I can pass the trials with ease. We just haven't had the time to take them.
Sure, blame a galactic war in the making on your problems. Like that excuse hasn't been used before.
Tahiri grinned, mirroring Klin-Fa's expression. Despite the years, it was evident they hadn't lost that bond they had made during the war. Fighting knee-deep in Yuuzhan Vong bodies did do that, but time had a way of erasing things. Tahiri was glad that her connection to her opposite wasn't one of them.
"Alright, you'll be teaming up with Maika and Toile," Anakin gestured to the Death Knights. "And as we make our rounds of the training session, three others as well."
"My pack's ready, and I'm ready to do my part," Hedda saluted.
"Jedi Apprentice Hedda, report to your station," Anakin said with mock seriousness, returning the salute.
"Roger," Hedda giggled, before heading towards the Death Knights.
"We're keeping that one alive," Tahiri murmured n a low, determined voice, squeezing Anakin's hand supportively.
"Definitely," Anakin said tersely. Together, they looked over the rest of the group. They were all too young from their perspective, all still blissfully unaware of what they'd be facing. "Let's try to keep the rest of them alive too."
"Definitely," Tahiri said definitively.
Anakin then allowed a faint, lopsided smile as Luke Skywalker approached them. "I guess this is what you felt when I volunteered to lead that mission to Myrkr, uncle."
The aged Jedi Master returned Anakin's tired expression with a nod. "I had hoped you wouldn't feel *that* burden for at least another decade or so. Then again, very few of my hopes have been realized as of late."
"Does it get easier?"

"Knowing that some of them won't survive the coming battle? That you've just sent a bunch of children to their deaths?" Luke said bluntly.
"I should hope not."
"Being a leader bites royally," Anakin muttered.
"That, I can agree with," Luke sighed. "I just wanted to inform you that your brother has entered the Transitory Mists and is now officially out of comm-contact."
Anakin released a slow breath. "Right on schedule. And how are things on the political side?"
"It's like we talked about. With the Jedi taking control of things, Master Kenth Hamner's stock shot up among the many senators. It's a foregone conclusion that he'll win next year's election now. Leia is still laying the groundwork for a time after Hamner though. Hopefully, when the crisis is over and things settle down, he can be convinced to let those less attuned to the Force come into office."
"For now, that's for the best," Anakin rubbed his forehead. "Okay, I'll continue to head the Denon part of Operation Dark Nest. Worry about the political stuff after the dust settles."
"Mara, myself, and the High Council will be keeping tabs on the operation."
"Even if most of the council is deploying to help lead other assaults on Killik-held worlds?"
"Even then," Luke nodded. "This is the first time the Jedi are unilaterally acting on galaxy-wide scale. Even with the support of GA intel, army, and navy, most of the Senate has very little idea about the particulars of the mission. There's a lot of concern about the repeat of the Tion Hegemony mess, with the Jedi overreaching their authority. While you younger Jedi are engaging the Killiks, Hamner, myself, and the more politically-minded Jedi will be running around soothing ruffled feathers."
"Thanks for that."
"It's the least we can do. Good luck out there, Anakin, Tahiri."
"Good luck to you too," Anakin gestured to the gathering of politicians waiting on the other side of a pair of transparent doors. "For me, those guys are a lot scarier than Force-enhanced sentient bugs."
"Agreed," Luke said wryly. "Good thing you have us old people to fight *those* battles."
"For now. Someday, that'll be our fight too," Tahiri pointed out. "We'll be the ones agonizing over the annoying details as Cassa, Jayce, Janek, Ben, and their generation rush off to confront the latest evils facing the galaxy…like an army of sentient footwear determined to enslave our feet or something like that."

"Right," Luke patted Anakin on the back and rested his hand briefly on Tahiri's shoulders. "May the Force be with you two. You're going to need it."
]-)-Scene One End-(-[

Jacen
(-==-(I)-==-)
So delicate a life. So innocent and beautiful. Those where the thoughts running through Jacen's mind as he stood on the balcony of the Queen Mother's quarters. Cradled in his arm was his sleeping daughter, her Force presence blissfully protected from the approaching storm of events. Never could he have imagined the feelings running through his mind, thought that such openness and happiness was possible. Gazing with a gentle lovingness at his daughter's peaceful expression, he ran one hand through the soft red curls that stood out against her milky white skin. Allana stirred at his touch, unconsciously nuzzling his hand before turning over against his chest to continue her slumber. Jacen's heart thumped loudly at the simplest of action, feeling his bond to his daughter resonate with everything he felt for her.
There was absolutely no way he was going to let anything happen to her. No way he would let her grow up without a father. Not if he could help it. As he held his daughter, all of Vergere's lessons seem to fly out the window and burst into dust. How could protecting such an amazing life not be worth the sacrifice of a galaxy? How could the proof of his love for his best friend be wrong in any way or form?
He heard the doors to the quarters open and knew that it could only be one person.
"It's been confirmed?" Jacen said slowly, reflexively gripping his daughter a bit tighter.
"Yes." Two pairs of footsteps sounded against the marble floor. "Just like the *Chume* and yourself predicted. The first skirmishes and engagements began thirty minutes ago."
"Then it's time to get to work," Jacen replied, a look of tiredness crossing his features. His mind traveled back to when the plan had first been made. Tenel Ka hadn't agreed to it in the slightest, but had also seen the logic in it.
"Surely you jest, Jacen. If we were to do this, the billions of civilian lives on Hapes will be in jeopardy. Not to mention the lives of Hapans throughout the system."
"And right now those billions of lives are conflicted. You've seen the intel reports. You're barely holding on to a slim portion of the nobility that will openly back you. Most of the others either support the

Heritage Council, not knowing that they're being manipulated by the Killiks, or don't care who's in power either way. This is true for the nobility, it's true for the common folk on the capital planet. Hapes is fractured at the moment. Most of the Consortium doesn't see the Corellians or Killiks as threats that will disrupt their way of life"
"My friend, my love. You just told me that your scans detected Killik ships on five of the seven Hapan moons. You also just convinced me to send my own fleets to other parts of the Consortium and to leave the defense of Hapes to yourself. Why wait for the Killiks to abandon their positions on the moons and strike? Why not attack them now when both the Hapan and Jedi Coalition fleets are together? It will be a clear sign of cooperation between our two fleets, a sign that Hapes doesn't stand alone."
"Tenel Ka," Jacen exhaled tiredly. "You've said it yourself, Hapes is stagnating. I don't want to tell you how to rule, but your reforms aren't gaining the support they should get. Hapes, the Consortium in general, has just grown too complacent with the status quo. Unless they have a reason to care, all the signs in the galaxy aren't going to mean anything to them. We take out the threat before it materializes, and the Hapans will never know just how close to annihilation their political games brought them to."
"But what you ask…I cannot just endanger all those lives because I want the Hapans united under my rule."
"And if you don't do this, Allana will face a Hapes that is still as divided in the future as it is today. The Consortium needs a reason to become unified, a reason they should follow Hapes and be proud to be Hapan. This is our one chance to do it. If we kick out the support of the Heritage Council and present to them a unified Hapes, when the Killik incident is over, they'll have no political strength left."
Tenel Ka's scowl showed her opposition to the plan and she moved to the balcony to gaze upon the city below. "This…this cannot be right in any way, Jacen. We are Jedi; we should not be putting our needs above the lives of so many others…yet…" She looked over her shoulder at the crib where Allana was sleeping. "Yet…for once in my short rule, I desire to be selfish. Does that make me a bad ruler? Being selfish just a little bit?"
"Bad ruler no, definitely makes us bad Jedi though," Jacen tried with a levity that fell flat."I'll try to do my best to minimize losses."
"Do so," Tenel Ka said, clearly second-guessing herself every step of the way. "I…I hope that you are right, Jacen Solo. That the lives lost because of this plan will be worth the lives they save in the future."
"I do too."

Jacen shook the conversation from his mind and refocused on his 'father-in-law'. "Our forces?"
"They report all is in readiness."
"Then you know what to do," Jacen said calmly. For someone who had just issued direct orders to his 'father-in-law,' the young man never lost an ounce of confidence.
Isolder inclined his head knowingly. "I do, shall I give you a moment longer with your daughter?"
"Yes, please." Jacen walked away from the balcony, rocking his sleeping daughter back and forth and focusing on her tiny face with a tenderness very few had the honor of seeing. Then, with a reluctant sigh he handed Allana over to the second person who had entered the room.
"She'll be in good hands, Jedi Solo," Jana, Tenel Ka's secretary and bodyguard, said earnestly.
Jacen kissed the top of Allana's head before offering Jana a reassuring nod. "I know."
His gaze never left the sleeping bundle, a reminder of just why he fought and did the things he had to do to make the galaxy a better place. It may have been selfish, staying in the Consortium while the rest of the galaxy faced a similar peril, but he trusted his brother and sister to get the job done. After all, his dad was right, the galaxy didn't mean anything if you didn't have anyone to share it with.
With one last smile that conveyed emotions he didn't mean, he bid Jana farewell and hurried to join with Isolder out in the hallway.
"It is always hard to leave your child behind," Isolder said understandingly. "But it is all the more reason to continue the fight so that you can see them once more. That way the time you sacrificed, the moments lost, will not have been in vain."
"I'm going to help your daughter build a kingdom Allana will be happy to rule," Jacen murmured. Their strides long and hurried. "Even if I can't spend the time I want with Tenel Ka and Allana, I can at least try and ensure their happiness and safety."
Isolder sent a pitying look Jacen's way. "You are here now, and that all that matters, Jacen Solo. Teneniel and myself would not have approved just anyone for our daughter, and you have proven our faith justified."
"Definitely have to do a better job, though."
"There's always room for improvement," Isolder remarked lightly.
"Still remember how to command a fleet?" Jacen said, trying to preserve the tone of their conversation.
"I'm sure I've forgotten more than you've learned," Isolder retorted, shaking his head at the 'impudence' of youth.

"As long as you haven't forgotten the important things, you should be fine."
"And you? It has been seven years since you commanded a massive ground force."
Jacen smirked faintly. "I'll figure something out. Solo-luck and all."
"I hope you have a lot of it then. You'll need it."
They reached a juncture in the hallway and Jacen smiled wryly at the older man, holding out a hand. "May the Force be with you."
Isolder took the offered hand and shook it once. "You as well."
Isolder released Jacen's hand and took off at a faster pace down one hallway, while Jacen hurried down the other. In no time at all, Jacen had reached one of the landing pads attached to the palace. Awaiting him was a lone gunship with several people already inside.
Jacen stepped up into the airship and called out for the pilot to take off. Once in the air, Jacen refocused his attention to the matter at hand. With Lowbacca in the opposite seat, he called out over the ramjet engines roaring on either side of the fuselage. "What's the situation, Lowie?"
"[Not good,]" Lowbacca arfed back. "[Sensors detecting a force of over a million life-forms approaching Tenel Ka Chume'dan from all directions. The speed of the Killik dropships took our fleet in orbit by surprise. The city's defense shield and anti-air cannons prevented the Killiks from landing directly in the city, but they've overrun the smaller settlements nearby en route to here. Our fleet in orbit is doing their best to fend off Killik attempts to take the remaining two moons, so we won't get any help from them. Smaller groups of Killiks are attacking other targets across the planet, but our people there are holding for now.]"
"Captain Serpa, give me a rundown of our forces," Jacen ordered the blond-haired Galactic Alliance officer. "Were we able to get everyone into position?"
"Per your command, our forces have their backs to the city's defense shields. Unfortunately, the numbers we're facing is going to make things difficult. We have at best a hundred and ninety-thousand ground units guarding this city. The other fifty-thousand were spread out to other key areas of this planet. We're working with the local defense units, but the odds don't look good. If you want, I can get some snipers into the taller buildings of the city. They can do real damage from the…"
"No."
"No?"

"There's a reason I'm keeping our forces out of the city," Jacen said. "Our goal is to preserve it as much as possible. If we put military units in civilian buildings, we're only going to make those buildings targets."
"But surely the bugs can't get past the defense shield."
"The Killiks haven't gone to war in several millennia," Jacen pointed out. "Who knows what they're capable of. As it is, their dropships allowed them to land far more soldiers than we expected."
"Do you have an alternative? With the Wookies and Noghri in the frontlines, they're going to need precision fire-support."
"We have over a hundred gunships. Put the snipers in them," Jacen commanded.
"Yes, sir."
Their transport wove in and out of the towering spires of Tenel Ka Chume'dan, passing through the defense shield after a short flight. Once through, the occupants of the gunship were given a bird's-eye view of the intricate network of defenses that had been laid out all around the city. Bunkers every few dozen meters, turbolaser turrets, E-web cannons, trenches, and now that the enemy was approaching, droids began laying out a field of mines. Supporting the entrenched positions were walkers and artillery pieces, tanks and atmospheric fliers. Despite the impressiveness of the fortifications, no one in the transport was certain it would hold against the numbers that would soon come crashing down into it.
On the ground, waiting their arrival, Nelani waved up at them. There was a solemn expression on her face, as well as a small amount of apprehension. She could feel the approaching danger just as well as he could. While the feeling was nothing new for Jacen, for her, this would be her first large-scale battle in her young life.
"Nelani," Jacen inclined, stepping off the transport.
"Master," Nelani greeted. "Killik forces are still a dozen kilometers away. As planned, Jedi Master Sebatyne and the Yavin Four Jedi have command of the southern defenses, Jedi Knight Saaav'etu and the Bothans are covering our eastern flank, and Jedi Master Kirana Ti guards the west. But you know that, of course. You made the plans. Umm…we have…"
"Nelani, breathe," Jacen interrupted with a patient smile.
"Yes, Master. Sorry, Master. I mean, I've read all about the Battle of Borleias and the one of Mandalore. Oh and the Battle of Coruscant too, of course. All the large-scale ground battles I could think of so I could get an understanding of…"
"Nelani."
"Right, breathing," an anxious-looking teenage girl got out.

Jacen took pity on his apprentice and wrapped a supportive arm around her, using the Force to help draw away her anxiety. She shivered violently, and Jacen could sense her fear of the upcoming battle.
"Do we know the makeup of the enemy forces?" Jacen asked, trying to keep her mind from freezing. He could feel Lowbacca add in his own support to the young teen and Jacen nodded in thanks.
"Yes," Nelani took another deep breath. "Several hundred thousand are actually Joiners. Ssi-ruuk, Chiss, Hapan, others."
"Several hundred thousand?"
"Yes. Almost a third of the attacking force."
"That's not good." Jacen reached over to the mobile command center's comm-station. "Sinsor Khal, this is Jacen Solo, do you read?"
"*Loud and clear, Solo."*
"Status on the Joiner neutralizing agent?"
"*En route to the frontlines now. The information your Danni Quee sent helped fill in the missing pieces of the puzzle. We were worried about how the proteins would bind with the..."*
"So it'll work?" Jacen cut off the Republic-era Jedi-turned-scientist.
"*It'll work.*"
"How much of the agent can we deploy?"
"*Right now? We have enough to lay flat thirty-thousand Joiners."*
"We have several hundred thousand on the way," Jacen reported, closing his eyes briefly.
"*Can't do a thing about that. We only have enough chems for thirty-thousand, and even then that's a miracle considering we only finalized the compound two evenings ago. If you want to synthesize more, it's going to take time and resources."*
"You did your best, thanks. Solo, out," Jacen exhaled slowly, glancing at the various commanders who stood around the outdoor comm-station. Jacen knew what had to be done, even if the cost would be high. The situation wasn't exactly unexpected; he had read the daily science-team reports and knew that they'd be short. He just didn't expect to be as short as they were, or for the Killiks to deploy so many Joiners. "Make darting the Hapan Joiners a priority."
"And the other Joiners?" Captain Serpa asked, standing with the other northern-sector commanders.
Jacen's face became emotionless. "Expendable. We're here to save Hapan lives both for politics sake and to maintain the stability of this region. Stun them if possible, of course, but don't risk your lives to do so."
"Understood."

"The moment the Killik force gets in range of our guns, open fire. We need to thin out their numbers before they reach our lines." There were nods all around. "Get the gunships airborne. We'll use them to pick off the front of the Killik formations, slow their approach as well. If it comes down to hand-to-hand, we'll have no choice but to retreat into the city. Now get to your stations."
The commanders quickly dispersed to their vehicles and took off to the frontlines. Jacen then looked down at where Nelani was still tucked against his side. "And the local news stations?"
"Holocams have been set up all along the battlelines," Nelani replied, tilting her head back to look up at him. "We've also got the local HoloNet news reporters set up on the tops of buildings and on some of the gunships. All of the Consortium is going to know about this fight."
"What about the local law-enforcement and militia?"
"They were a bit unhappy with their roles, but they've agreed to it."
"Okay, I'm going to need you to stay here at the comm-station," Jacen said calmly. "You'll be vital in maintaining communications with the other sectors. We have a limited number of forces at our disposal so how we deploy them will be crucial."
"I won't let you down, Master."
"Don't worry about me. Just don't let yourself down."
"How can I not worry about you? You're the one that's going to be wading into a massive army of killer bugs."
"I've plenty of experience wading into things that want to kill me," Jacen said glibly. "I'm still alive, so I have to be doing something right."
"Does the Queen Mother know how bad your sense of humor is?"
"You should try and hear some of her jokes," Jacen smiled faintly. "Though her humor has gotten better recently."
"Be careful out there, Master."
"You too, Nelani."
"I'm just guarding a comm-station a kilometer behind friendly lines. Why would I need to be careful?"
Jacen blinked blankly at Nelani, then sighed and shook his head. "You'll learn that Jedi always have to be careful because something *always* goes wrong with their plans. Call it cosmic intervention or something, but I think we were given the ability to detect danger because we're always getting into dangerous situations."
"Well, right now my giant-bug-sense is tingling," Nelani gestured to the distant plain. "Do me a favor and squash a few of them for me?"
"Will do." Jacen re-boarded the gunship he had come in on. Nelani waved good bye, and Jacen gave her a two-finger salute before the gunship revved up and shot towards the frontlines.

(-==-(II)-==-)

Looking through the electrobinoculars, Jacen could make out the hulking forms of three-story tall, tusked, beetles. Fortunately, there only appeared to be a dozen of them on the way. Unfortunately, there was quite the crowd all around the Killik's tank-analogue. The mass stretched back far beyond the line of colossal bugs, and nearly stretched to the horizon on either side. Pretty intimidating since well over two-hundred thousand Killiks, and another hundred thousand Joiners were about to hit their side of the city.

Against the sixty-thousand strong force protecting the northern perimeter, the odds didn't look too favorable.

Between this formidable mass of insects and the Galactic Alliance defenders was the vast expanse of prairie land that surrounded the basalt rock formation of Tenel Ka Chume'dan in all directions. Flat, covered in small shrubs and plant-life, the open nature of the surrounding land made the capital city of the Hapan Consortium an easily defensible ground position. And with the Killik fleets tied up in orbit, the defenders didn't have to worry about being hit from above.

Already Jacen could see blossoms of fire tear up the approaching Killik formation as Galactic Alliance and Hapan artillery opened up with everything they had. One barrage homed in on a Killik tank. But the explosions that bombarded its sleek shell only seemed to enrage it. With Nelani coordinating the fire, however, a Force-accurate shot landed directly into the creature's open mouth and blew it to bug-bits.

"*This is Blackstar squadron, we're en route now.*" There was a loud whirring sound overhead and five dozen gunships and airspeeders roared by.

V-wings, considered obsolete by most of the Galactic Alliance military were easy surplus buys for the Jedi Order and still packed a punch. They made their relevance heard by releasing a salvo of their cluster missiles the moment they had a firing solution, raining death and destruction onto the Killik forces.

Backing them up were Rothana Heavy Engineering's latest IAT gunships, whose anti-personnel laser turrets and sniper compliments added to the aerial barrage. These high-speed assault platforms swooped down on the Killik lines, streaks of red blazing downwards with punishing consistency.

Yet for all the destruction being wrought upon the Killik lines, the Killiks neither ran in panic nor hurried their march towards Tenel Ka Chume'dan. It was as if they didn't even care they were dying by the hundreds.

Jacen felt the anxiety rise from the soldiers up and down the frontline as they too witnessed the morbid uncaring of their approaching enemy through their own electrobinoculars.
Then, the Killiks struck back.
What looked like a thousand anti-air missiles suddenly rose up from the horde in unison, a giant smokestack of contrails that reached out towards the V-wings and IATs like ghostly fingers. The sudden counterattack was completely unexpected and within the blink of an eye, over half of the air-support was falling back to the ground in burning wrecks.
Before the shock of it could even register, the ground between the Killik forces and city defenders broke open. The defenders, expecting the enemy to still be a few kilometers away, were completely caught off guard as an army of massive centipede-like creatures burst out of the soil barely a half-kilometer away.
Exclamations of varying degrees of surprise and disbelief sounded, and the startled defenders promptly opened fire. Laser and rockets blasted into the tough, chitinous shells protecting the many-legged creatures. Several dozen were downed before reaching the line of defenders, but that still left many dozens more. The half-kilometer was closed in shocking time, several positions overwhelmed by the sheer speed of the monstrosities. The centipede-like creatures used razor-sharp limbs and mouth to disembowel and dismember anyone in their path. One rose up on its hind legs to challenge a tank, and had itself blown apart for its trouble. A bunker spewing flame from each of its openings became another target. A pair of the slithering creatures headbutted the duracrete construction repeatedly, receiving face-fulls of flame each time. Yet they continued their attack unabated. Finally, one burst through the weakened wall, plowing into the bunker and massacring the people inside.
Everything changed when three of the centipedes made a bee-line for Jacen.
Rather than run or ignite his lightsaber, however, Jacen simply sat down where he was and closed his eyes. As the trio shrugged off laser blast after blast and continued their trek towards their seated prey, Jacen remained where he was. All three reared up to strike at him. In an instant Jacen held out a hand, his eyes flashing open with undeniable power and purpose. Immediately the three creatures dove, but not onto the Jedi. The centipedes nearest to the trio were suddenly beset upon by their own allies. The trio ripped down the line of other centipedes, their own razor-sharp limbs tearing into their former

friends with the same homicidal fury and vigor that they had attacked the Galactic Alliance defenders with.
The ground shook beneath Jacen, and another centipede rose up from directly beneath him. Rather than flinch, Jacen rested his hands atop the armored head of the massive insect. Then, riding the momentum of the giant bug's emergence from the earth, flipped himself so that he was standing atop the lethal insect.
Jacen fought back a smile as he familiarized himself with the way the insect's mind worked. All he had to do was use the Force to deprive it of its bond to Lomi, and the simple creature was his to command.
Looking left and right, he called upon the Force and reached out across his battleline. One by one, the surviving centipedes began to withdraw; heads thrashing back and forth as they fought his control. Those that were proving too resilient had the others promptly set upon them.
Standing atop one of the larger centipedes, Jacen easily stood out. The fact that half of the surviving centipedes were now circling him and his mount meant that he was unmistakable even from across the battlefield. Several holocameras floated about, concentrating on the way the golden light of the Hapan sun made Jacen look completely divine as he stood on his mount with Jedi robe and hair fluttering in the light Hapan breeze. Smoke curled up in streams all around him from the destruction left by the centipedes, his expression a mask of concentration and determination.
Cheers rang out from the defensive line. "Solo! Solo! Solo!"
Though Jacen wasn't strong enough to control the countless dozens of gigantic centipedes, the centipedes beyond Jacen's limit found themselves the targets of focused firing and writhed and died under the intense barrages. Several centipedes still embedded in the trench-lines, were flailing left and right as Noghri and Wookie soldiers climbed upon it and began hacking it to pieces with their own deadly blades and anti-vehicle explosives. The tide had been turned on the northern front, and with the multitude of cameras recording the battle, everyone knew why.
Jacen held out his hands and sent the remaining centipedes back towards the Killik lines to cause as much damage as they could.
But the centipedes had distracted the forces with their brief moment of chaos, and in that time, the Killik forces had closed the distance. The ground began to tremble and shake from the mass of feet stampeding their way. The cheers died off, and the troops hastened to reform their protective lines.
The Killiks hit the distant minefield first, their bodies being thrown into the air or perforated by mine after mine. But still the Killik came. When

the defenders began lining up firing solutions, the Killik formation began to shift. The tens of thousands of Joiners rushed to the front, each slavishly loyal to the nest they were a part of and willing to die for it.
"Orders, sir?" Captain Serpa yelled up to Jacen.
"Just as we planned, captain."
"Roger." The captain touched his earpiece. "Use the Joiner-darts on anyone who looks human. When we run out, stun shots and tranq-shots if you can. The lives of the other Joiners are *not* a priority."
The seconds ticked by, tactics and formations being switched in response to the Killik's living shield. The Joiners were the first to open fire. Blaster carbines, slug-throwers, and all manner of weaponry lighting up and spewing death-giving energy and molten projectiles. The anti-Joiner darts, stun rounds, and various other non-lethal projectiles that flared out in response appeared almost anemic in comparison. The Joiners were falling, but not nearly fast enough as the Killik line continued to close the distance.
Unfortunately, the plan to keep the Joiners alive by stunning them began to go awry only moments after the first few darts made their impact. To the horror of the defenders, any Joiner that was incapacitated was summarily executed by the Joiners around them. Stun shots, anti-Joiner serum-filled darts, ensnaring webs, it didn't seem to matter what the Joiners were hit with. The moment they were dropped they became a liability to the collective mind and were removed with extreme prejudice.
When the terror of what was happening began to be realized by the defenders, the Killiks took advantage of the sudden drop-off in opposing fire.
As if on springs, a wave of bipedal Killiks twice the height of an average human leaped out from behind the lines, soaring through the air like giant grasshoppers and landing square in the midst of the defender's line. These towering Killiks wielded an edged, staff weapon that whistled as it sliced through the air. Some were shot down mid-air, but a majority had taken advantage of the non-lethal rounds being fired and landed up and down the line of defenders.
Caught by surprise, and with many weapons still loaded with non-lethal rounds, the defenders received heavy causalities before they managed to recover. The Wookies and Noghri in particular took to the new threat with frightening vigor, bellowing challenges before engaging, and in some cases tackling, the large bugs. The clangs of metal blades slamming against the edged staff-weapons of the Killiks sounded out

above the torrential blaster fire and screams of the wounded and dying.
Up and down the line, hand-to-hand combat paired with laser fire, but the Killik line was growing closer by the second.
"Out of anti-Joiner darts!" Came a cry.
"Switching to lethal charges!"
"Keep hammering them!"
Jacen, from his position on top of his commandeered centipede where he had been maintaining a loose battle meditation, held up his comlink. "Nelani, call in the Corellians."
"Roger, Jedi Knight Saav'etu just requested the same thing. All sides are really getting pounded."
"Not a surprise," Jacen breathed. "How are you holding up?"
"*Not used to so much death,"* came Nelani's subdued reply. "*But I can tough it out.*"
"That's my apprentice," Jacen said sympathetically. From above, he could sense the arrival of a couple more Force presences.
"Corellian dropships are moving through the space battle now," Nelani reported.
"And how's that going?"
After a pause, Nelani responded. *"According to Lord Isolder, as good as one can expect. Apparently these Killiks are extremely suicidal and drive their damaged ships into ours. They also are keen on hijacking our own ships and using them against us. We're taking a beating up there, but at least we're keeping the Killiks occupied."*
Keeping his gaze rooted to the sky despite the chaos going below him, Jacen nodded once. "I see the Corellian dropships now."
"An extra hundred thousand troopers on their way," Nelani confirmed. "*I'm sending the majority your way. Your side is the hardest hit."*
"Appreciated. Have them land behind the Killiks and catch them in a pincer movement."
"Roger."
The defenders let out cheers as dozens of ships with Corellian markings made a dramatic fly-by overhead. The guns of the dropships and assault shuttles opened up on the Killik lines, blasting large swaths of the insectoid army in a single pass.
Even then, the Killiks seemed to become all the more determined to push into the city.
The Joiners were mere meters away from the defensive lines when they suddenly pulled back once more. Thousands of insectoid Killik soldiers poured forward in their stead, spinning their bone and metal staffs as they charged with reckless abandon.

"The line is collapsing, sir!" Captain Serpa yelled out, his blaster blazing a path that was immediately filled with more Killiks.
Jacen acknowledged the captain with a single nod, the plan advancing to a stage only he and Tenel Ka knew of.
"This is suicide," Tenel Ka hissed, gray eyes narrow and furious as she threw the datapad back at him. "To let the Killiks live is one thing. To let them land is another. But if our sensor readings are right, they outnumber the force you've brought at least five to one. Your ground forces will be annihilated, with those in space fairing little better."
"This is a battle we'll only truly win if we come from behind," Jacen said calmly, seemingly unfazed by what he had just suggested. "All of the Consortium will be watching how your new allies conduct themselves on Hapes. How we match up to the best your people have to offer. We can go the quick and easy way, bombard the Killik positions on the moons, prevent them from landing, and declare a victory. But if we do, we'll lose the hearts and minds of your people. If the victory is easy or simple, then the Hapans will wonder why they just didn't take care of it themselves. If no blood is shed, if it does not look like the struggle was a formidable one, your isolationists will only win more supporters. To the Consortium, those I brought with me represent the greater galaxy and what we have to offer the Hapans. What better way to prove our friendship and loyalty to the Hapan people than with our lives?"
"Jacen..."
"Hear me out, Tenel Ka."
"I will not. The lives of your people are not trifling pawns that you can..."
"If not them, then it will be Hapan lives that will be lost," Jacen cut her off. "Your support is tenuous at best. How do you think it will appear to the rest of the Consortium if you lose another million Hapan soldiers in yet another war with beings from outside the Transitory Mists? This way, those who die will die and have their lives mean something; a Hapes fully united and allied with over three dozen governments from outside the Transitory Mists."
"Do your people even know that you plan to sacrifice them in such a way?"
"*Sometimes sacrifices must be made. It's either we do this to convince your opposition to change their minds, or wipe the opposition out and make no attempt to save them from the Joining. Personally I feel the second option provides more security to your throne. But wanton slaughter of everyone who disagrees with you is not a road I'm willing to travel down. So, if we can't beat them, we have them... join us."*
Jacen had to look away at the ironic choice of words.

"*But to have Allana's throne be built upon the corpses of the men and women who trusted in you and followed you to this place so far from their homes?*"
"*We know the good Allana will be able to accomplish in a Hapes that fully backs her, in a Hapes where she is surrounded by friends and allies. One day, perhaps, that good will make up for what we will do...*"
"*I have not yet agreed to your plan.*"
"*But you will,*" Jacen said softly, meeting his lover's gaze. "*I promised I'd do everything in my power to protect you and Allana. And I am. Is it such an unforgivable crime? They've come here knowing there is a chance they won't leave. They've come here to honor an alliance with the Jedi, but also to forge an alliance with Hapes. They've come here to make the future better for all. Is their lives such a terrible price that the bright future their deaths will secure not worth it?*"
"*I am trying to make a Consortium that does not have to rely on such duplicity,*" Tenel Ka said grimly.
"*My apprentice once pointed out something to me. There's the reality I want, and the reality that exists in actuality. That Consortium you dream of can never be in today's climate, won't ever survive. But by using the duplicity and tools that exist today, it's possible to build that dream for Allana. When duplicity, betrayal, and intrigue can be set aside and one can survive without it, <u>then</u> perhaps we can have that Consortium you wish. But now isn't the time.*"
Tenel Ka looked away, pacing and exhaling as her mind churned over his words and logic. Occasionally her eyes would dart to the crib where Allana slept, Tenel Ka's lips tightening each time. Finally the red-haired queen pinned Jacen with a gaze that would have caused pretty much anyone else to melt on the spot.
"*One time only, Jacen. I will permit this only this once because it is you that asks it of me. That dream I have might be impossible for today, but by continuing to use the deceit that mars my court, I will continue to make that dream impossible.*"
"*If things go the way I hope, once is all we'll need.*"
"Sir!" Captain Serpa yelled again as the explosions and blasterfire continued to sound all around.
"Hold the line for as long as you can," Jacen replied evenly. He leaped off his centipede just as Killik artillery homed in on it and blew it to bug-dust. "Only when there is no other option are we to retreat into the city. We need to give the Corellians time to mount their own offensive."
"Master," Nelani's voice was controlled, with a touch of panic.
"Nelani?"

"*I just got word from the fleet. The Bothan flagship was taken out. Admiral Ardas Fey'lya is presumed to have been killed. The Bothans on the ground are also being routed. A giant sinkhole opened up beneath them and took out most of their heavy emplacements. Jedi Saav'etu is requesting reinforcements ASAP."*
"They'll have to hold. If we deploy the others now, it'll be too soon," Jacen said, his voice containing no emotion. Several Killiks made to charge him, but he held out his hand when they were only steps away, and a split-second later, they were kneeling before him. "How are the others holding up?"
"Heavy losses on all sides. The Killiks deployed twice the number of those beetle-tanks on the southern front. The western front is actually quieting. Master Ti reports that the fighting is nearing an end."
"Then have her redeploy her people to the Bothan lines as soon as able," Jacen ordered. A flick of his wrists, and the Killiks before him charged their nearest brethren.
"I just did." Nelani replied after a beat. Behind the Killik lines, Corellian ground forces began to unleash their own brand of mayhem and destruction, their shuttles taking off and renewing their aerial assault.
"Good, then stand by." Jacen activated his lightsaber as another onslaught of Killik warriors approached. "We're not out of the woods yet."
(-==-(III)-==-)
Once again within the Fountain Palace on its basalt perch overlooking Tenel Ka Chume'dan, Jacen's mind dimly registered the columns of smoke that rose up on all sides of the city's perimeter. The arrival and departure of countless med-evac transports also barely fazed him, nor did the fact that he had just spent the last dozen hours fighting a battle that could have easily been over in two. A battle that could just have easily been avoided altogether with a painless orbital bombardment of the moons that now shone brightly in the sky.
All that didn't matter now, however, as he held his daughter in his arms. He had done what had to be done, fought a battle that had ended in a victory in any case. The victory itself was pointless, all that mattered was *how* that victory was obtained and how the rest of the Consortium would react to that. The HoloNet had been full of constant replays of the battle from the hundreds of holocams that had been recording it. Every sacrifice, every brutal moment, played out for all the Consortium to see and judge.
It had all been worth it.
At least that's what he tried to tell himself. He couldn't help but feel a metallic bitterness on his tongue, a spiky scratchy feeling in his throat,

and the sting of tears that he refused to shed fill his eyes. Now that the battle was over, he could finally allow himself to feel the guilt he had held at bay. Though it had been a very long time since he had seen himself as a black-and-white Jedi, he knew that he had crossed a line that could never be uncrossed.
He bent down and kissed his daughter on her forehead, rocking her small body back and forth in an attempt to calm both her and himself. What else was he supposed to have done? What he did now would help Tenel Ka get the Hapes she wanted, the Hapes they wanted for Allana. Would make sure Allana wouldn't have to make the same choices he had just made.
"I did right, Allana," Jacen murmured, his voice shaking as he did. A cool shiver ran through his entire body and he held Allana tighter to his bare chest. "I did right, didn't I?"
"Master," Nelani's voice disturbed the peace he had requested since the end of the battle.
Jacen looked up, his conscience looking haunted as it stood in the doorway. "Nelani? You're still up?"
"Jedi Knight Lowbacca figured it out," Nelani said, taking a hesitant step forward. "Only he and Jedi Knight Sebatyne know….and me…of course. Only those who really know you know though, so don't worry. I asked Jedi Knight Sebatyne and Lowbacca to let me speak to you first."
Jacen closed his eyes. There was no point in asking what she was taking about. "How?"
"Jedi Knight Lowbacca said that the battle was too sloppy for something to have been planned by you and the Queen Mother. With the stakes so high, the outcome of the battle wasn't certain until the very end, and that wouldn't have been something you and the Queen Mother would have let happen. The only option was that you deliberately let the battle unfold as you did for reasons that will be revealed later."
"The outcome of the battle was always certain," Jacen murmured, taking his daughter and setting her back in her crib and walking back to the balcony. "It just never mattered."
"A hundred-seventy thousand, eight hundred and sixty two," Nelani quoted, her voice soft as she took another step forward. "That's how many people we lost today in orbit and on ground. Nearly twice that injured, some disfigured and permanently crippled. Yavin Four lost a third of the Jedi that came today. Dathomir was spared because her Jedi are with the Queen Mother. But the Bothan force was annihilated."
"In return, the nobility and commoners not under Killik control are siding with Tenel Ka in numbers she's never had," Jacen replied,

staring at the mobile of the galaxy hanging over Allana's crib. "Support for an alliance with governments outside of the Consortium has skyrocketed. Isolder has already fielded petitions from nearly every non-Killik-controlled planet to expedite the treaty process. The Consortium was given a first real look at how big and bad the galaxy truly is out there. How those of the galaxy will bleed and die to protect Hapes in turn. The third of a million lives affected in the battle will have secured the loyalty and alliance of billions. This way Hapes knows that we'll honor our treaties, and knows equally well that they won't survive in the galaxy without those treaties. The battle galvanized everyone to action, made the Hapans see just how petty their political squabbles are in the face of what the galaxy contains. It's the best possible outcome."
"Tell it to the nearly two-hundred thousand dead," Nelani shot back heatedly, eyes flashing. "Tell it to the men and women who died trusting you'd lead them through this just like you did back during the war. Tell it to the Noghri, the Wookies, the Commenorans, and the dozen other worlds whose people were just sacrificed so you could have your treaties."
"You don't think I know what I just did!" Jacen shouted, whirling around.
Nelani flinched and took a step backwards."I don't know, Master. Why don't you tell me?"
"You wouldn't understand, you don't have a family, Nelani," Jacen shook his head.
"No, but I have a Master that means the galaxy to me," Nelani glared. "Tell me what you just did to yourself, your heart. Tell me that I can still trust you; that I can follow you to the darkest places of this galaxy and you'll protect me! A Jedi…"
"Is nothing more than an empty title!" Jacen hissed, bringing his fist down on the plasteel table. "Something the rest of the galaxy uses to describe the Order. What the Order uses to describe their set beliefs and practices. You've looked into the history books, Nelani. The Jedi Order of today is nowhere similar to the Jedi Order of the Republic. That Jedi Order is different than the Jedi Order of the Old Republic. And those Jedi are probably completely different than the first people who called themselves 'Jedi'. The Jedi have to become more than just what their name suggests if they want to maintain peace and order in this galaxy. Some sacrifices have to be made, but some things shouldn't be sacrificed ever. I just sacrificed the combat abilities of over a dozen governments so my daughter will be safe, and don't you dare tell me I should have done things in reverse!"

Nelani absorbed his rant stoically, a single tear escaping her eyes the only sign of emotion. "I would never tell you that, Jacen. But you never answered me. Would I be able to follow you into the darkest corners of this galaxy and come out alive in the end? Or will I be just another one of your sacrifices to make the galaxy a better place? Will I be just like the hundred-seventy thousand, eight hundred and sixty two, dying without even knowing the real reason why?"
"Nelani…"
She advanced, her face fierce. "Is my life worth one galactic treaty? Two? Is it worth more or less than that of Jedi Knight Lowbacca's? A planet? A future that you can't even be sure will happen? Tell me Jacen? Am I still Nelani Dinn, your lovable apprentice, or have I just become a statistic to you? Something to weigh against the rest of this crazy galaxy?"
"I don't need this, not from you," Jacen breathed.
"Answer me, damn it!" Nelani yelled, advancing several steps until she came in contact with a wall of Force energy at the balcony's entrance. "I've read the history books! You think I don't recognize that fodder about sacrifices? What do you think happens when people's lives start becoming something you can jam into an equation? When you stop feeling and become this automaton that only pretends to be Jacen Solo, Jedi extraordinaire? Will the Queen Mother be next and join us equation-people? You've already turned your daughter's future into one."
"I know!"
Jacen spun around, and his action caused Nelani to blink in surprise. Tears were running down his cheek from reddened eyes, the pain creasing his face and his shoulders slumped. Against the backdrop of the vast Hapan landscape below and the glimmering Transitory Mists above, for the first time in Nelani's young memory, Jacen looked small. He sagged back against the balcony railing.
"I know," he repeated in a softer voice, almost sighing as he said it. He reached up and appeared to be just as surprised as Nelani to feel the tears on his cheeks. "I know."
"Master," Nelani whispered.
"You're too young to understand what I'm doing. Why I'm doing it. Not strong enough to make the decisions needed to save billions of lives at…"
"I don't want to save billions of lives, just one," Nelani whimpered, stepping across the threshold and onto the balcony. "Just one. I'm your apprentice, Master. I'm supposed to be learning how to be a better Jedi from you. I'm supposed to help you learn in turn, although just what

I'm supposed to teach you, I don't know. If I'm too young, teach me so I'll understand when I get older. If the reason truly is worth it, then I'll back you, Master. Just…just make sure you don't sacrifice yourself for this future you clearly want. Because that's not the sort of future *I* want to be in, and I'm pretty sure Allana will want her dad growing up."
"Maybe I'm not strong enough to make those sorts of decisions either," Jacen said with a dry, weak laugh. he turned back around to gaze at the city. "Maybe all I have are excuses that sound good but are completely empty. This galaxy is falling apart but I can't, I won't, let it take my best friend and my daughter with it."
"You're an idiot, Master. You know that, right?"
"You'd probably be the only one who'd even think to call me that," Jacen laughed softly.
"How in the blazes am I supposed to help you if you keep everything in that thick mess you call a head?" Nelani rested on the banister next to Jacen, gazing out at the distant city. "How is anyone supposed to know that you need help if you don't tell them? You're a twenty-seven year old Jedi Knight with burdens even those full-fledged masters don't have. Me, I'm just lucky enough that you saved me back on Lorrd. As great as we are, even we can't take on the entire galaxy by ourselves. Didn't your dad tell you back on Denon? You aren't in this alone."
Jacen didn't respond, his expression closed off as the night winds fluttered his brown hair. Vergere's many lessons over the years conflicting with the feelings of his heart. He was a Jedi, but he wasn't. Wanted to look at the situation logically, but couldn't. Needed to protect his family, but couldn't trust anyone else to do it? Could he? Once again his actions reminded him that Vergere had been right, his empathy was weakening him. His feelings for Tenel Ka and Allana were clouding his judgment and making him choose options he normally wouldn't otherwise. Maybe it had been a mistake for him to come to Hapes, he should have had his brother come in his place.
But it was too late to change that now. And it wasn't like he could just jettison his feelings for his family because it was the 'proper' thing to do. Yet, Nelani was also right, he couldn't claim he loved Allana and Tenel Ka and yet reduce them to elements of some equation.
"Master?"
Finally, he exhaled and ran a hand through his hair. "Maybe if I hear it enough times, my not being alone in this fight, I might start believing it."
"Then I'll say it to you every day if I have to," Nelani murmured, reaching out to gently grip one of his hands in her own.

"The deaths of all those people, they won't be for nothing," Jacen said softly. "They've already helped to secure a stronger Hapes. All we need to do now is to fix the Killik problem."
"No big deal," Nelani smiled tenderly.
"Yeah, all we have to do is hope the Corellians and Tenel Ka can do their part."
"We still have those several thousand Killiks that escaped somewhere on this planet," Nelani reminded.
"A joint Hapan-Jedi Order Coalition will be placed on that," Jacen nodded.
"Politics?"
"We're on Hapes, of course."
"What are you going to do about the Bothans?"
"That was an unexpected hitch in the plan."
"With so many dying for Hapes, the Hapans will be obligated to defend them if the Vong attack them," Nelani said.
"I'm hoping my brother and his wife can talk the Vong out of doing just that," Jacen ran a hand through his hair. "For now, I can only focus on the present, here on Hapes."
(-==-(IV)-==-)
"Wait, this can't be right, can it?" Jacen said in a hushed whisper, feeling slightly out of place on the royal seat normally reserved for the crown prince of the Hapan Consortium. He tugged at the collar of his royal Hapan garb, a cultural necessity for the audience he was soon to be addressing.
"I assure you, it's quite right," Isolder said amiably. "You and my daughter became the Consortium's official rulers the moment Allana was born. Though you do not intend to stay in the Consortium, you nevertheless rule in the absence of Her Majesty."
"And this wouldn't have anything to do with you trying to duck out of your royal duties as the Queen Mother's father?"
"When did I ever say it didn't?" Isolder said lightly. "Don't worry, I'll blink twice if you say something socially unacceptable, three times if I'm close to panicking because of your lack of Hapan protocol."
"Thanks."
"It shouldn't be that difficult today. The battle won over many of those who had been on the fence, so to speak. All you have to do is preside over the memorial ceremony and accept the various treaties in the name of the Queen Mother."
"Will the court even listen to a man on the throne?"
"They'll humor you," Isolder patted Jacen's shoulder sympathetically. "Humor them in turn. I find that to be the easiest way to do things."

"Right," Jacen breathed. He took several calming breaths, his talk with Nelani the previous night still fresh on his mind. "Jana, please let the guard know they can open the doors."
"As you command, Jedi Knight Solo," Jana tilted her head briefly and held up her wrist communicator to relay the message.
Seconds later, the large shades covering the towering windows of the Lorell Hall were lowered, and the magnificently carved wooden doors creaked open. Sunlight bathed the many pillared assembly hall, the blue Hapan sky bright and cloudless, glimmering like the deepest of oceans. Slowly, the hall began to fill. Hapan nobles still in conversation with delegates from various galactic governments entered sedately. Other nobles, commonfolk invited from the city below, Hapan and galactic media representatives moved into the room as well. Some of the soldiers who had been present during the fight to defend Tenel Ka Chume'dan joined the small rush of people flowing through the doorway. All were dressed in their finest of clothing or dress uniforms, each looking resolute in purpose and nature. If there was any evidence to confirm the affect of the battle it was the way that everyone stood for once as a uniformed group. Rather than standing in their own cliques or political groups, all the nobles stood as a unified block of individuals, their biases forgotten in the wake of just how close they had come to being wiped out en masse.
The crowd flowed in, some taking a seat in chairs that had been set up, others preferring to remain standing. It was a very diverse crowd, with both human and non-human sentient species filling the Lorell Hall for the first time in the Hall's creation.
When the room was filled and the low din died away, Jacen very slowly rose from the throne. Clad in the clothing of a Hapan crown prince, he held out his hands and his robe's billowing sleeves swept outwards.
"We are all part of one galaxy. One vast galaxy. Alone, we are all easy prey. Alone, bickering and worrying over matters so small in comparison to the troubles of an entire galaxy, we will perish. We saw it all yesterday, how we were taken to the brink. Yet we survived thanks to the sacrifices of the brave men and women who ventured so far from their homes to defend what they believed in. How they died so that the friendship between the Hapan people and their own may be born from their ashes.
Even at this moment the Queen Mother fights on for all of you, for the concept of a unified Hapes. Unified with each other and with the rest of the galaxy. Yes there are dangers in the greater galaxy, but when hunting a dangerous beast would you prefer to do it alone, or with allies at your side? The treaties proposed between the Hapans and the

myriad of governments whose people gave their lives in defense of the Consortium will only strengthen all involved. Later this afternoon a memorial will be held for all those who died defending the ties we have only just begun to build. Died defending a possible future where Hapans and the governments of the rest of the galaxy stand side-by-side with unbreakable bonds between them. They have done their part."

Jacen did his best to keep his face impassive, knowing he was going off script with the next part of his speech. It wasn't what had been planned, but it was his way for atoning for what he had done during the battle. The future wasn't his to dictate or create, and Nelani had done a very good job of reminding him of that. Although Tenel Ka would probably give him a swift whack on his head for making her job more complicated, he knew that what he was about to do was the right thing.

"It is with the authority of the *Chume* Tenel Ka Djo and the *Chume'da* Allana Djo Solo that the Royal House of Hapes now puts the matter of these many pacts of friendship to a vote of the nobility and the Hapan people. We will not force these treaties down your throat, nor shall we force the Consortium to walk down a path it does not wish to travel. The Royal House of Hapes serves the people of Hapes, and we will listen to your voice and adhere to whatever you decided. We can only hope that your choice is ultimately what is best for Hapes and not for petty and selfish reasons."

The din in the room rose again as wide-eyed nobles and commonfolk all gaped at him in completely shock. Even Isolder, as impassive as he kept his face, was radiating surprise and amazement. Jacen kept his own features expressionless as he stepped off the dais that contained the trio of thrones. He had cast the die, now it was up to the Force to decide whether all those lives lost had been worth it.

"When the Queen Mother returns victorious from her campaign, a vote will be held across all the Consortium. And though the Royal House will provisionally approve these treaties of friendship, it will be all of Hapes who will decide whether you wish to remain alone in the galaxy or with friends. Whether you wish to join hands and become united in purpose and vision, or remain isolated and insular. The Royal House will accept your judgment either way.

Until then, we will continue to do our best to protect the Consortium and rid it of the Killik threat. I will personally be leading a strike force to root out the remnants of the invaders on this planet because I will not rest until all of Hapes is safe from this threat. Hapans, members of the Jedi Coalition, will you join me in making the future one that is brighter

than the present? Will you put your own needs aside for the good of those around you? Join hands with the Royal House of Hapes and let us take our first steps into a future we can all enjoy together."
At first a stunned silence greeted his unconventional speech. But then slowly, one person began to clap. Then another. And another. Smiles and nods of determination washed over the crowd as the applause picked up in speed and volume. Soon, the entire room was cheering, looking as if they were ready to march right outside the door and take on the Killiks all by themselves.
Jacen inclined his head, walking along the narrow aisle ways between the crowd. "Then it is decided. We will go to fight not just in the name of the Queen Mother, but for all in the Consortium. We will fight back to back, side by side, and no threat shall ever menace the existence of our peoples again. After this afternoon's memorial, not only the Consortium, but the rest of the galaxy will see our resolve. We do not stand alone, and we *will* win. For Hapes! For the future!"
The cheers rang out louder than before, and Jacen very slowly returned back to his throne, a benevolent smile pasted on his face.
"Now go and prepare your people for that final push needed to cement the friendships between Hapes and the outside galaxy. The Royal House cannot do it all alone. And when the Queen Mother returns, we will give to her a Hapes we can all be proud of."
The uplifted spirits of everyone seemed to soar ever higher, and the Lorell Hall became a hive of activity as nobles and soldiers alike quickly began coordinating amongst themselves.
"Congratulations, Crown Prince Solo," Isolder murmured in a low voice. "My daughter will be pleased."
"I hope so," Jacen muttered back. "This is her kingdom after all. Will you be able to keep the less cheerful individuals at bay while I wrap up the Killik mess here?"
"You'll find the number of those individuals is nearly non-existent at the moment," Isolder replied. "They've all rallied around the cause you put forth, all believe in it to the core of their beings. You better hope the memorial ceremony has enough seats, because after that address, people will be coming from all over Hapes to show that their planet stands with the others."
"I just realized something funny."
"And that would be?"
"Normally it would be my brother that gets the people to emotionally invest in an uncertain endeavor."
"You *are* both Solos," Isolder remarked.

"And imagine what Hapes will be like when Allana takes over," Jacen said with a faint smile.
Isolder smiled as well. "One many have dreamed of but few would have thought possible."
"The future isn't here yet, Crown Prince Isolder," Jacen breathed. He looked across the hall at Nelani and inclined his head. "But it's definitely in good hands."
(-==-(Chapter End)-==-)

Zekk
(-==-(I)-==-)
"Twenty-meter spread, keep your eyes peeled," Royal Hapan Guard Captain Moreem Espara whispered into her comm. She was one of the commanders at the forefront of a thousand strong Hapan ground force, sweeping through a field of colorful neck-high flowers.
The task wasn't as pleasant as it might have sounded. Though it was mid-day, the thick layer of clouds above made it dark enough for the night-vision-challenged Hapans to break out the night vision goggles. Not helping matters was the torrential freezing rain coming down in sheets all around them and the increasingly muddy ground. Their goal was the mountain range a dozen kilometers away, making the trek there guaranteed to be a miserable one.
"Are we sure the Corellians are on our side?" whispered a voice. "I'm not picking up anything on sensors."
"Corellians said the planet was saturated with bugs. That this place had the highest concentration of Killiks in Heritage Council space," another soldier murmured, boots splashing through a large, muddy puddle. "The only thing this place is saturated with is water."
The group continued their sweep, advancing through the field with weapons at the ready. Forks of lightning danced across the sky, and the wind picked up.
"Sensing anything, Jedi Knight Zekk?" Taryn murmured, her and her sister flanking him. Water dripped from her crimson locks and ran in rivulets off her armored jumpsuit. The goggles they wore granted them vision in the near darkness caused by the thick cloud cover.
"Something is definitely here," Zekk replied. A distant thunder echoed after his statement. "Dangerous somethings."
"There goes my hope of this being a wild bantha chase," Taryn sighed. "At least this weather can't get any worse."
"The weather's like this for much of this time of the year," Zadaria native, Corporal Chiri Aros said from next to them. "Nice, freezing and

wet. Thunderstorms optional. It's why our stormberry wines taste so good. The berries soak up all that moisture and are extra juicy."
Taryn brushed several strands of moisture-soaked hair off her forehead. "Unlike your berries, I guess I prefer drier climates then."
"The lieutenant does have a point, though," Chiri looked around the field. "According to Corellian Intel, these fields should be crawling with bugs. We already had to take out those Joiners back in the village, but that was three days ago. We haven't encountered a single being, Joiner or Killik, since."
A terrified scream sounded from behind them. Everyone turned, weapons raised. An entire squad of Hapan soldier appeared to have brightly-colored flowers attached to their faces. They staggered around, trying to pull off the flower without any success.
"Me and my big mouth," Chiri groaned, bringing her blaster rifle up to look for any more threats.
As several medics tried to close in on the hapless Hapans, the unthinkable happened. The flowers attached to their faces detonated with the blast of a fragmentation grenade, completely blowing off the heads of those they had been attached to.
More of the 'flowers' sprung up from their stalks, launching themselves at the faces of those nearest to them. Blaster fire flashed through the rain-soaked field. But because of the speed at which these 'flowers' were moving, and the poor illumination, friendly fire also began to mount. It was also quickly evident that blaster fire wouldn't be enough to take the threat out. The red bolts seemed to splash harmlessly off these flowers as if they were rain drops. Only those armed with slug-throwers or plasma projectile weapons had any success in taking the 'flowers' out with one shot. This led to many of those who tried to hold their ground becoming victims of the suicidal attackers. Explosions like popcorn erupted up and down the Hapan lines, heads, limbs, and torsos being blown to bits in the blink of an eye.
Two of the flowers by Zekk sprung up at him. His red saber ignited with a hiss and cleaved through the pouring rain to slice the assailants in half. Steam rose from his saber as the rain evaporated against its length. Another swirl and swish had Zekk slice apart a third flowery attacker. With the bodies on the ground, Taryn, Trista, and Zekk could see that the flowers weren't flowers at all, but some sort of spider-like creature with camouflage capabilities.
Unfortunately the discovery did very little to help the situation. Though not all the flowers in the field were fake, enough were that the thousand-strong force was taking serious casualties.

"Fall back!" Moreem called out, her plasmacaster shooting a spider out of the air. Next to her, one of the colonels in charge of the division fell victim to two spiders. One attached to the colonel's face, the other to her shoulder, and they both detonated in a gory mess. Moreem was buffeted by the blast and swore loudly. She held her comlink up and repeated her order over the boom of the thunder above. "Fall back!"
A spider suddenly leaped on her leg and wrapped its limbs around her. Moreem lost her footing in the muddy ground and disappeared beneath the canopy of neck-high plants.
Her disappearance, fortunately, hadn't gone unnoticed
"Captain!" Trista yelled, halting her retreat. She began to wade towards Moreem's last location.
But a loud blast rippled across the field as the creature attached to Moreem's thigh detonated, taking the captain's leg with it and propelling the Hapan's limp body through the field of flowers.
With the Hapan forces already in full retreat, Moreem was fast behind enemy lines but out of sight of those that might have gone back for her.
Still conscious, however, Moreem was using what energy she had left to blast away a few spiders that had been crawling towards her. The light of her plasmacaster was enough for others to pinpoint her position.
"Zekk!" Trista turned to House Zel's all-purpose Jedi.
"Go, Taryn and I will cover you," Zekk nodded, his dark hair and Jedi robes soaked with the rain. The trio raced into the deadly flower field, Taryn switching to her vibroblade and Zekk advancing with his lightsaber. All around, the spiders bombarded the trio. Several Force-blasts kept the larger waves at bay, but it also made them a more attractive target for the rest of the spider horde.
"What are you doing?" Moreem gasped out as Trista slid down next to her.
"Saving your ass, sir," Trista replied tersely.
"I gave the order to fall back."
"Moreem, shut up and let her save you," Zekk interjected, his saber cleaving through another spider.
Thunder boomed overhead and bright forks of lightning crossed the sky directly above them. Though Zekk was barely affected, the night-vision using Hapans on either side of him were temporarily blinded by the flashes. In that split second, another spider leaped out from the tall brush around them, this time landing on a distracted Taryn's face. She let out a muffled yell of fear, clawing at the spider with no success.
"Taryn, stay still!" Zekk barked.

Showing the trust she had in him, Taryn stopped struggling and stood stalk still, hands at her side. For someone with an explosive spider attached to her face, she seemed remarkably relaxed.
And she had good reason.
Zekk acted with surgical precision, his saber slicing the spider in two in a fraction of a second. The crimson blade stopped scant millimeters from Taryn's face, highlighting it in its blood-red hue.
"Thanks," Taryn said, knowing just how close she had come to having her head blown off. Rain dripped down her face from her sodden red hair, mingling with the sweat and mud that she had collected over the skirmish.
"You're welcome," Zekk breathed, looking just as relieved as she was.
Taryn then grabbed him by the tunic and shoved him aside, throwing her vibroblade as she did. The weapon impaled another leaping spider, knocking it out of the air mid-flight.
"Thanks," Zekk smirked.
"You're welcome," Taryn pulled her blade out of the creature. She gave Zekk a brief kiss on the lips and then turned her attention back to the danger around them.
"We need to get back to friendly lines," Moreem breathed, her face haggard.
"She's lost a lot of blood," Trista said worriedly. "Concussion trauma from the blast wave too."
Zekk and Taryn nodded in acknowledgement, their expressions grim. All around them they could see the skittering shadows of many, many spider-like creatures.
"I ordered you to go back," Moreem slurred, her eyes unfocused. She was aware enough, however, that even she could see the threat all around them.
"Discipline me later, captain," Trista retorted, her face showing rare worry as she continued to help Moreem along. The soaked ground was making the trip all the more difficult, the footing uncertain.
"Stay close to me," Zekk murmured, his red blade creating a light that sent the spiders scuttling back into the tall grass. One spider tried to land on Trista, but Zekk's instincts had him bisecting the creature before it made contact. Several others tried to take advantage of his motion, and three were diced into bug-bits while the fourth had Taryn's vibroblade introduced into its head.
"I hate intergalactic space bugs," Taryn grumbled, yanking the blade from the corpse and wiping it off.
"They're massing to strike," Zekk breathed, sensing the intentions of the predators surrounding them.

"I *really* hate them."
With telepathic coordination, dozens of spiders leaped from their cover at the quartet. Almost at the same time, a hail of superheated slugs filled the air around them. The quartet looked towards the direction of the fire and saw the rest of Moreem's squad advance through the soggy field.
"That light-sword of yours makes you really easy to find," Chiri called out, emptying her slug-thrower's clip and then slapping another one in. Next to her, Nyrani Lovett advanced with dual plasma pistols, guns blazing with lethal accuracy. The brunette Hapan picked off one last spider before rolling her eyes. "Only *we* would charge back into a minefield."
A sniper bolt whisked across the field and blew a spider to goo. Over the comlink, Hiana Roh added her own view. "Ladies Zel, you do realize that the rest of the squad is mandated by the *Chume* to protect the two of you. Please stop making things difficult for us."
Kiali Beyele lobbed several devices into the area around the retreating four. There was a series of flashes and the devices turned the rain-soaked field into a raging inferno. The squeals and hisses of dozens of bugs being flash-fried joined the sound of torrential rain and helped Zekk lead his charges towards the friendly forces.
"Told all of you to fall back," Moreem grumbled.
"Don't mind the captain, she's delirious from blood loss," Trista said, accepting the team's medic's, Lilan Irina's, help in moving the near dead-weight.
The rest of the squad formed up around them advancing as fast as they could. With the demolition of the wave of spiders, the rest seemed to have had enough and had slunk back into the cover of the field.
"This is First Lieutenant Lilan Irina of her Majesty's Alpha Squad. Requesting medi-evac transport as well as saturation bombardment," Lilan called out over the torrential rain. "Use my signal for coordinates."
"*First Lieutenant Irina. The Royal Star receives your transmission and medi-evac transports are already en route to your location. What happened down there? We're getting reports from all detachments, heavy casualties from each position."*
"Bugs outsmarted us," Lilan said darkly. "Stand by, we might need those transports to make a second run."
"Copy, medical staff are awaiting the first wave. It's a no-go on sat-strike though. Friendly signatures are scattered all over your location and you cannot guarantee an accurate strike with the cloud cover."

"We'll make do with the transport then," Lilan grimaced. She held up a hand to have everyone hold position. The seconds ticked by, the feeling of immense danger not abating in the slightest.
There was some relief when they saw the medical transport cut through the dark clouds above, its engines a bright spot in an otherwise dim sky. The relief was short-lived, however. From out of the mountains, more bright spots suddenly appeared.
"Medical transport, break off! You've been painted!" Lilan yelled.
Moreem's squad could only watch in horror as a volley of rockets slammed into the cumbersome transport. Its shields held at first, but them crumpled under the kinetic barrage. Within seconds, the transport was spiraling down to the ground a flaming wreck.
Rockets started shooting up from the flower field and mountains in a devastating stream of destruction. The other medical transports in the region never stood a chance. While some were still descending to designated sites, most of the transports were already taking off again. The medical transports in the air attempted evasive maneuvers only to be pounded from a multitude of directions. Just like on the ground, the sky was suddenly full of balls of fire and violent blasts. Shuttle pieces started falling with the rain, the fates of everyone on board stunning those on the ground.
"Oh hell," Chiri breathed, looking pale for a moment before her face turned emotionless. "Doc, can you keep the captain alive?"
"I'll do what I can for her, Corporal," Lilan answered. "But it'll help if we get back to friendly lines."
"Looks like Hiana is shining the way for us," Beyele gestured to the far tree-line where the Hapan sniper was located. Pulsating from the top of one of the taller trees was a signal light.
"Sergeant Zel, Lieutenant Lovett, you'll have to carry the captain while I work on her. Corporal Aros, the rest of you, cover our retreat. I don't want any bugs sneaking up on us."
"Yes, sir!" the ten-member squad snapped off sharp salutes.
"Jedi Zekk."
"First Lieutenant," Zekk tilted his head in acknowledgement.
"I'll be busy getting these three back in one piece, make sure you get the others back in a similar condition."
"Minus the whole leg getting blown off," Chiri voiced.
Lilan glared at the corporal, but then turned to await Zekk's response.
"We'll get them back."
"Then we move!"
The group started running as fast as the terrain and Moreem's condition would allow. Hiana appeared just as protective of the others

as her plasma sniper rounds whisked by them at regular intervals, picking off threats before they had even emerged.
Half way to the sniper's location, Zekk felt an immense sense of danger, and his head whipped about to the tree-line. He quickly tapped his ear-piece comlink. "Sergeant Roh, abandon your position! Get out of there!"
A split second later, a rocket flared by over their heads with a roar, its passage marked by a sudden burst of heat and wind. It raced through the air and dove down into the thicket of trees the sniper had been using as cover. A moment of silence passed before the explosion shook the ground and sent bits of tree flying through the air.
"Hiana!" Taryn called out urgently into her own comm, the grove now a flaming bonfire fast being put out by the rain.
No response came, and Taryn clenched her jaw, spinning a glare at the darkened field of flowers behind them.
"Reroute to secondary fall-back," Lilan barked out, her hands working to set up an emergency blood-bag over her captain.
"Zekk, is she alive?" Taryn breathed, falling into step with the others.
"I don't know," Zekk shook his head.
Taryn cast another long glance at the now smoldering clearing. The distance between them growing at an increasing rate. "Come on, Hiana. Come on."
"There!" Ria called out. The others followed her gaze and saw the signal light flash weakly and then stop.
"She's probably badly hurt," Taryn said. "First Lieutenant!"
"You and Jedi Zekk, go! The rest of you continue with us. Fall-back Two, Corporal Zel."
"Roger, sir."
Taryn and Zekk took off in a fast sprint towards the distant clearing. Mud and water splattered all around them with every step, their breaths coming out in clouds of vapor as they braved the freezing rain. When they reached the deep crater left by the rocket, charred bits of wood still steaming from the contact with the water, they slowed their pace.
"Hiana!" Taryn called out again.
"Over here," a weak voice replied.
Taryn's gray eyes whipped towards the sound of the voice. Zekk, having the advantage of the Force, was the first one to move, kneeling by what looked like a mound of mud and debris. Taryn skidded down next to him only seconds later. The Hapan sniper had either been covered by the debris or covered herself with them and was nearly

indistinguishable from the ground. If it weren't for the pair of blue eyes staring up at them, it would have been impossible to see her.
"Hostiles in the area," Hiana breathed, bringing a finger to her lips.
"Injured?"
"Very," Hiana replied, sucking in a breath.
Taryn gripped her vibroknife once more. "Zekk, fix her. I'll cover."
Zekk nodded, using the Force to assess the wound sniper before him.
"We'll get you back home to Hapes in no time, Sergeant."
"Thanks for the warning," Hiana replied, her eyes falling close again.
"Would have been vaporized."
"And I can't have my favorite sniper being vaporized," Zekk said with a smile.
"Bad for unit morale," Hiana nodded weakly.
"Really bad," Zekk agreed.
After his analysis, Zekk did his best to hide his expression, but Hiana picked up on his hesitation. "Really bad?"
"Burns on half your body, organ trauma too."
"Definitely feels like it."
Just then the mud on the sides of the crater erupted upwards, and several bipedal bugs swinging polearm weapons emerged.
"Company!" Taryn relayed.
"I'm going to need some time to get her stable."
"Just leave me," Hiana murmured. "I'm supposed to be protecting the *Chume*'s cousins. Not put them in jeopardy."
"Badly injured people aren't allowed to boss others around," Zekk chided. "Taryn?"
"I'll get you the time you need," Taryn called back. She flipped her vibroblade into her off-hand and drew her blaster with the other.
"You see, no problem at all," Zekk kept his voice light as he worked the Force into the injured woman's body. Around his age, Hiana had been among the first of the squadron to accept his presence in the squad. She had also been the one who had eliminated the enemy snipers back during his first adventure on Relephon, and had taken it as a personal insult that they had shot him first. Even then, Zekk knew that it would take everything Tekli had taught him to keep her alive. Trusting Taryn to keep them covered, Zekk turned his entire focus into mending the more dangerous injuries.
In the center of the blast crater, Taryn was putting all of her own abilities to use as she engaged eight of the bipedal bugs. One tried to impale her, and almost in slow motion, she twisted to the side and blasted the offender in the face. Two others moved in. She dropped low, her body splashing the mud around her, and flung her vibroblade

at one and shot the other. A fourth managed to knock her blaster from her hand, but she rolled to the side and picked up the staff-like weapon dropped by one of the bugs. Wielding it with a familiarity borne from her usage of the Sand People Gaffi sticks, Taryn proceeded to decapitate another two bugs.

With the odds halved, the remaining four bugs began to circle her. Taryn just flashed them a predatory grin. "Come on!"

The bugs moved all at once, their staff-weapons sweeping out at her at four different levels. Taryn parried three at the same time, but had to let the fourth hit her across the top of her shoulders. She gritted her teeth against the pain, and then countered in a spinning motion that sent raindrops flying off her red braids. A second later, and she halved her opposition once more.

The last two stepped back in a nervous retreat, and Taryn held up her appropriated weapon in challenge. The two bugs continued their slow withdraw out of the crater. Once near the top of the crater, the bugs then promptly turned and ran, disappearing over the rim. With a battle cry, Taryn sprinted across the muddy surface, running up the side of the crater with the intent of finishing them off.

She crested the crater, and promptly halted her charge, her cry dying off as she took note of her situation.

The two Killiks that had fled apparently had many more friends.

An army of them.

All armed with wicked looking bladed weapons and pulsating with murderous auras.

With a disarming smile, Taryn edged her way backwards, carefully stepping back into the crater as the mass of bugs approached.

"Uh, Zekk. We might have just run out of time." Taryn called over her bruised shoulder. She backed up until she was against Zekk's back, watching as the army of bugs surrounded the crater rim.

"Don't worry, help's coming," Zekk muttered, still focused on Hiana.

"Soon?"

"Jedi help."

"Oh, flashy entrances then," Taryn said, turning to ignore the horde. As if they didn't even exist, she knelt beside Hiana. "How is she?"

"Stabilized most of the internal damage, needs a bacta dip."

"Of course. She's Hapan. Nothing short of a bacta-required injury would take her out."

The surrealness of having a conversation when a mass of homicidal insects was about to charge wasn't lost on Zekk or Taryn. But the two had great faith in their allies. Faith that was rewarded just as the bugs began to charge.

An assault shuttle suddenly zoomed into position overhead. The side-gunners on either side of the shuttle let loose a continuous torrent of lasers that sent the bugs fleeing. Shortly after, Dathomiri Jedi Rajade and Sanola leaped down, slicing into any bug who tried to advance. In the shuttle, Dathomiri Jedi sniper Ijun fired his maser rifle and reduced several more bugs to ash.
"Someone call for a ride?" Sanola asked lightly, as if she hadn't just dropped into a crater and sliced apart a dozen Killik.
"Float us up," Zekk nodded.
"Jeez, you want us to do everything," Rajade chuckled. "You first Lady Zel. Your sister's just a tad worried about you."
Before Taryn could object, Rajade gestured with a hand and sent the Hapan princess skyward and into the open shuttle. With the assault shuttle's gunners providing fire, both Sanola and Rajade then combined their efforts to safely float Zekk and Hiana onboard. With their mission done, the two Jedi leaped the short distance, and the shuttle burned jets.
"Well," a waterlogged Zekk managed, finally able to catch his breath. "I guess the battle for this planet has really begun."
(-==-(II)-==-)
Five hours may have passed, but the rain was still pouring, the thunder booming, and the lightning arcing across the sky, even over the command center several dozen kilometers away. The portion of the command camp dedicated to medical operations was jam-packed with medics and the injured, the sounds of many, many hundreds in pain ringing out.
Soaked in mud and grime, Zekk grimaced. Being a strong Jedi meant that he was able to feel the suffering through the Force and had to mentally box it away in his head as he stepped into the command tent. Despite his Jedi advantage, he was sore and aching, and chilled to the bone. Even after the timely rescue by the Dathomiri Jedi, they hadn't been in the clear. The Killik counter-attack had been brutal on every level, leaving a multitude of squadrons stranded across the battlefield. Being the Jedi that they were, the Dathomiri Jedi and Zekk had opted to give their places on the transport to another group of wounded Hapans. Of course, this meant that the Jedi had to take the long way back through enemy-infested territory through the driving rain and slick ground. If what they had seen was anything to go by, the Hapans definitely had their work cut out for them.
Entering the command tent, Zekk was drawn short by the many unfamiliar faces gathered around the holotable in the center of the room. Only Taryn, Trista, Lieutenant Nyrani Lovett and Major Gadell

Vessau were recognizable, with Gadell being the lone figure from this morning's command team present. All were grim-faced and solemn, the toll the last few hours had taken evident in their postures.
"Jedi Knight Zekk," the Hapan Royal Guardsman nodded. "I can see you've noted the rearrangement in command staff."
"A lot of field promotions," Zekk noted. It was hard to miss the fact that Gadell was the highest ranking officer present.
"Yes." Gadell answered. "The Killiks specifically and inexplicably targeted our commanding officers during the ambush. That was the cause of much of the confusion and panic."
Zekk mentally accepted the information. It was unfortunate that the orchestrator of the Zindarian campaign, the Hapan general in charge, was among the dead. "How bad were we hit?"
"We were forced out of all of the zones we had been advancing in," Gadell replied. "Casualty reports are still coming in, but so far we have close to three-thousand dead, twice that wounded or missing. I will be the first to admit that we underestimated the Killiks and have paid heavily for it."
"What we need," Lieutenant Nyrani said coldly. "Is a full-scale orbital bombardment of everything around the Tinbar Mountains. Burn the bugs out."
"Not an option, lieutenant," Gadell shook his head once.
"Sir," Nyrani gritted out, obviously not happy to have a male commanding officer. "My squad was just…"
"Your squad wouldn't be the only ones that took casualties," Gadell cut her off. "In fact you're lucky that none of your squadmates were killed. We have whole battalions trying to re-order themselves, multiple squads where the highest ranking officer left is corporal. We lost twenty transports trying to evacuate our forces. Had three hovertanks destroyed and half an artillery division commit fratricide when the Killiks came up directly beneath them. General Arrines assumed that the might of the Hapan Royal Army would steamroll any bug threat, and was clearly mistaken. We won't compound that mistake with more."
"Why is an orbital strike out of the question, sir?" A Hapan captain asked.
"The area around the Tinbar mountain range is vital to the economy of this system," Gadell answered evenly. "The Queen Mother is unwilling to win this battle if it means we leave this system a ghost system for the years to come. Additionally, our entire objective on this planet is to engage and occupy Killik forces. So this will be a long and drawn out affair. If possible, we'll even try to force the Killiks to call in

reinforcements from other infested systems. It means that us grunts will have to tough it out and make sure we don't stumble into any more bug ambushes."
Before any more could be said, the flaps to the command tent opened once more, and three female officers dressed in uniforms denoting their non-standard associations, entered. The woman in the middle, a middle-aged brown-haired colonel, brushed by Zekk without notice and stepped up to the table.
"I am Colonel Zian Rais, Hapan Royal Intelligence Services. With me are Major Salis of SigTel and Major Inola of the Security Services. Under the contingency orders drawn up by General Arrines, I am assuming command of the Hapan ground forces on this planet."
"Your orders, Colonel," Gadell and the others saluted.
Zian nodded approvingly. "Have our divisions ready themselves for a counter-offensive." She activated the holotable, and an overview of the area surrounding the Tinbar Mountains appeared. "We'll be concentrating our forces to retake sectors two and three, and establish a beachhead there. We'll use the artillery and air-speeder force to soften up the Killik positions before sending in our armor backed by our infantry units. Hapans do not back down from a threat of this nature, and we will show the Killiks that we are not so easily cowed."
Zekk maintained his silence, but Nyrani Lovett, who had worked with him off and on for two years, raised a thin eyebrow. "You disagree, Jedi Knight Zekk."
Eyes turned to him, and Zekk shifted uncomfortably. Realizing they were waiting for a response, he stepped up to the table.
"Overconfidence is what got us into this mess," Zekk said mildly. "We knew the Killiks had ground forces, but we were completely unprepared for the diverse array we saw. Who's to say that what was deployed was the extent of their forces? I saw the report about those rockets that took down our transports. They detonated millimeters from their target, allowing the shrapnel and kinetic energy to bypass the shields. The Killiks have already proven they can plan. They've also proven they can act on those plans. We might be here to keep their attention on us, but they're here to completely wipe us out. It's not my place to recommend a course of action, but I would advise that we take up holding positions around the areas we do control and not move until we're absolutely certain we're not sending them into the meat grinder."
"Were that possible Jedi Knight Zekk, the order would have been given," Colonel Rais answered evenly. "We cannot allow the Killiks to establish themselves any further than they have. Nor can we have the

Killiks dismiss our presence and worry about the other plans in motion."
"Colonel," Zekk replied in the same calm voice she was using. "The Hapan marines and army just lost several thousand people in two hours of fighting with nothing to show for it. I don't know if you read the briefing, but a single Killik hive can have close to a million, maybe even two million drones ready to fight and die for it. The Killiks are in entrenched positions with intel on our military capabilities no doubt gleaned from Hapan Joiners. If our losses continue to mount, Hapan combat readiness will drop and it won't matter if we beat the Killiks because no one will be left to stop the next threat to the Consortium. In the Vong War, Tsavong Lah, their Warmaster, made the mistake of sacrificing his warriors to win battles. In the end, the Vong ultimately ran out of people to sacrifice."
"If we were to withdraw, all the territory we have gained…"
"The Killiks *let* us have the territory so they could flank us from all directions. We need to pull back from *their* chosen battlefield and make our own. If the fleet can't provide orbital support without damaging this planet's infrastructure, then we need to use our mechanized divisions and lay down pin-point artillery strikes." As Zekk spoke, he found it ironic that his experience in the Yuuzhan Vong War had applicable uses in his current life. In the war, he had been a soldier alongside his friends, but he had been a soldier commanded by General Antilles, Garm Bel Iblis, Kre'fey, and a host of expert tacticians. Even Anakin Solo had the ability to analyze a situation and maximize the use of everyone's abilities.
Zian, however, didn't appear as awed of his abilities. "General Arrines had these plans well thought out. A counter-attack is required if we are to boost the morale of our forces. Besides, you are an outsider, a male, and a Jedi Knight, Royal Intelligence was given…"
"Here, I will make it easy for you," Trista spoke up for the first time, her words clipped and impatient. The fire in her gray eyes was a rare sign of the stressful toll the day had taken on her."Jedi Knight Zekk, as a member of the Royal House I, Trista Zel, hereby promote you to the rank of general. You outrank her now, please order her to shut up."
"You can't do that," Colonel Rais blinked wildly.
"*Sergeant* Zel cannot just promote a non-Hapan, especially a non-Hapan male to the rank of General of the Hapan Armed Forces," one of Zian's subordinates spoke up. "There has never been a male Hapan general, much less…"

"There is now," Trista said tersely. "Now, if you don't have anything useful to add to this briefing, you can either leave or listen to General Zekk's plan."
"See here!" Colonel Rais objected. "This is…"
Taryn cut her off this time glancing at the other lower ranking officers in the tent. "All in favor of Trista's decision?"
"He sounds like he's the only one who knows what we're up against anyways," one of the other captains nodded.
The others all shrugged or nodded in turn, looking tired and exhausted from seeing their units decimated by the underestimated Killiks. Zian's mouth opened and closed several times, before she glowered at the mutiny.
"The Queen Mother will hear about this!" With that, she and her two aids stormed back out into the rain.
With the trio gone, eyes turned back to Zekk.
"Your orders," Lieutenant Lovett said with an amused quirk of her lips.
"I take it this isn't how generals are normally selected?" Zekk said in a low voice to Trista, who had moved to stand next to him.
"Normally Her Royal Highness chooses them," Trista nodded. "In emergency situations like this, however, the command staff can field promote someone to take charge. It's as you said, general. We can't afford to keep throwing our people into the meat grinder and hope to come out ahead."
"I'm only a general if the major agrees too," Zekk stared pointedly at Gadell, whom most of the female officers in the tent appeared to have forgotten about.
Gadell just tilted his head politely. "Until the *Chume* tells me otherwise, I have no problems with it."
"Great," Zekk sighed, glancing at the expectant faces of the officers in the tent. It took several loops before the words in his head gathered themselves into something coherent. After all, what does one say when inheriting an army by popular vote? "Get your people healed up and rested. They're going to need to be at their best when we launch our own counter attack. We'll avenge their friends, but in a way that minimizes any more loss of life. I'll contact Tenel Ka…sorry, the *Chume*, and formulate a clearer plan of action while you do."
The officers saluted and left the tent, leaving him alone with Gadell, Nyrani, and the Zel twins.
"General," Gadell said, amusement in his voice.
Zekk knew the bewilderment must have shown at least somewhat and smiled ruefully. "Great, I go from ambassador to general."

"First male general to command a Hapan groundforce since its founding," Taryn quipped "I don't think I've seen Colonel Rais so ticked off before."
"You know her?"
"She was in line for General Livette's job, before Livette won out," Taryn said. "She and General Arrines were actually in favor with Ta'a Chume, and our cousin offered them a posting as a way of reaching out with her grandmother's old allies. Colonel Rais is okay, but not the sort of person you want in charge against a threat like the Killiks."
"It's not entirely her fault," Zekk said, feeling bad for the Hapan colonel. "Intel is hard-pressed to show the Queen Mother they have *some* handle on the situation. Heck, we all are. How's Moreem and Hiana?"
Trista spoke up, her expression closed off and neutral. "Captain Espara took the first emergency transport back to the fleet. Her condition is said to be critical after she picked up an infection."
"Sergeant Roh is slightly better off," Taryn supplied next. "She's opted to remain planet-side and is currently in a life-supporting suit until her burns heal."
"Lieutenant Irina is next in command, right?"
Nyrani cleared her throat politely and shook her head. "Technically, you are…General Zekk."
Zekk cast an ever suffering glance to Gadell, who held up his hands and clearly wanted no part in it. "Fine. Have the squad get some food and some rest. I'll have you out on a recon mission in a little bit."
"Sir," Nyrani saluted.
"Sergeant Zel, wait a moment, please," Zekk said, before the red-haired warrior left with her squad. Trista nodded once and stood by the tent.
Zekk looked back over to Gadell, the fatigue from the day catching up to him. "I know you have a direct line to Tenel Ka. Do you mind taking one of the medi-evac shuttles back to the fleet and giving her an update in person? I'll call her in a little bit to fine tune some of the plans I'm working with but it has to be driving her crazy to be stuck up there and letting other people do the fighting for her."
"I definitely know what you mean," Gadell cracked a wan smile. "And no problem. You just make sure the rest of our army doesn't become bug food. I'd hate to explain *that* to Her Highness."
Gadell exited the tent, leaving Zekk and Trista alone.
"Trista," Zekk said gently, sensing the emotion the more stoic half of the Zel twins was keeping from everyone.
"I am good to go, sir," Trista said, her body ramrod stiff.

"Come on, let's get some fresh air," Zekk gestured to the outside of the tent. She fell into step with him, her gray eyes now betraying nothing. All around them, the Hapan army was regrouping and restocking, rain lightening up so that it was now coming down intermittently instead of in sheets. Without a preamble, Zekk spoke. "I'm planning on sending your group deep into enemy territory. Those trying to take Sector Five encountered the heaviest opposition, more so than all the other sectors combined. They also lost the most people. The Killiks have something there, something they don't want us to know about."
"We'll find out what it is, sir."
"Trista," Zekk brushed a flap of one of the supply tents aside and gestured to the younger woman. She followed, albeit a bit more reluctantly. "Your thoughts betray you, Trista. *Can* you focus on the mission? Focus on backing up the rest of your squad? Lieutenant Lovett is in charge, can you take orders from her?"
Trista was silent, her gray eyes darting towards the ground as she marshaled herself. "I…I'll be ready. I just…"
"It's okay to worry about those we care for," Zekk said tenderly. "If you need to sit this next one out…"
"No!" Trista blurted, her head jerking upwards. "No, when I started my relationship with Moreem…Captain Espara, I promised her that if anything happened…to her… I would continue to serve the Queen Mother. That hasn't changed. I still have to look after Taryn, the others. With Moree…the captain down, she'll be counting on me to make sure they all stay in one piece."
"Make sure you let them look after you too," Zekk smiled faintly.
Trista saluted. "I will, Jedi Knight Zekk."
Zekk returned the salute lazily. "Go get some food and a warm shower first. Your squad's going to be gone for at least a week."
"And you, Jedi Knight Zekk?"
"Me, I'll be looking up ways to keep this campaign in one piece. It's my first time as a general, you know."
Trista matched Zekk's wry smile. "Good luck, sir."
"You too, Sergeant Zel. Make sure you get back alive."
"Naturally," Trista raised a red eyebrow. "After all, just who do you think you're talking to?"
(-==-(III)-==-)
If there was one place Zekk didn't expect politics to complicate things, it was on the battlefield. Sure he might have seen Antilles and Kre'fey in action, but he hadn't been aware of the back-room dealings the two had had to put up with. Even if he was friends with the Queen Mother,

Zekk couldn't avoid the surprising maneuver Tenel Ka had been forced to take after receiving Gadell's report.
Evidently Ta'a Chume still had a very strong following, much like Ni'Korish had before her. Rather than alienate the key officials and soldiers that her grandmother had installed, Tenel Ka had chosen to include them at cabinet and other high-level posts. Given that Teneniel had let Ta'a Chume choose most of her officials, this meant that Tenel Ka was also inheriting a great deal of her mother's officials as well. And since Ta'a Chume had actually been the one to build up the Hapan Royal Navy in the first place, with Tenienel adding onto it in her reign, most of the senior military officers were actually from Ta'a Chume's era. This posed a big problem given that, while most of the lower-ranking officers, captains and under were loyal to Tenel Ka; most of the officers above captain, those in a position to advise Tenel Ka about a course of action, were loyal to her now deceased grandmother's way of doing things.
Just thinking about it made Zekk's head hurt, and he wondered how the Hapans had managed to keep it together for the many centuries the Consortium had existed.
"You despise me," Colonel Rais commented from across the holo-table. She had been named the co-commander of the Hapan ground forces by Tenel Ka.
"I don't know you well enough to do that," Zekk shook his head.
"You disapprove of where my loyalty lies."
"Why does what I think of you matter?" Zekk questioned softly. "We're both trying to do our best to preserve the lives of those who trust us to make decisions with their lives."
"You would be the first to think that way," Zian remarked, rearranging a holographic representation of the Hapan troops. "You saw earlier. Even the royal Zels have a low opinion of my character and abilities. Those who were in favor with Ta'a Chume are often seen as conniving back-stabbers who would betray their own blood if it meant advancement. I was but a teenager when Ta'a Chume came into power. She personally selected me to join the Royal Intelligence Services."
"A Jedi is trained not to let our personal feelings get in the way of achieving our goals," Zekk replied. "And though I admit that what little I know of Tenel Ka's grandmother doesn't make me view her favorably, you aren't her."
"Tell that to the forces loyal to the Queen Mother. I might as well be Ta'a Chume reincarnate to some. General Arrines had a sound plan, it is not my fault that we suffered the casualties we did."

"General Arrines wasn't used to fighting this sort of enemy," Zekk pointed out. "Neither are the Hapans for that matter. I understand that you are trying to show Tenel Ka that you want what's best for Hapes. But rushing a military victory isn't possible in this case. The Killiks aren't like the Vong or insurrectionists, or any of the other threats that the Hapan forces have faced."
"You literally summed up our experience with those two," Zian commented wryly. "Before the Vong invaded, the only real threats we faced was an occasional incursion by the Empire, and pirates. The Hapan army may be several million strong, but they rarely get the chance to use their skills."
Zekk nodded. "Hapes is more experienced taking on organized armies or Hapan rebels. Not giant, mind-controlling space bugs. If we try to use standard Hapan operating procedures, we'll be blown apart in no time. The situation calls for unorthodox plans. For maneuvers not in the Hapan military textbooks."
"Which is why you sent Alpha and Gamma, and those ten other squads out earlier," Zian studied the holo-display, which indicated the position of each of the twelve squads and the vital signs of those in the squads.
"Yes," Zekk enlarged the readout for Taryn and Trista's unit. "Standard Hapan response to the defeat earlier would have been to send in the big guns and saturate an area with troops. Instead of doing that, I'm having those squads gather intel on the Killik capabilities as well as chart out any Killik positions they might run across. Because these squads have been ordered not to engage or threaten Killik forces, the Force won't register them as a threat to whoever is controlling the Killik nest."
A strange silence settled over the two of them as they continued to review readiness reports and plan out the next offensive.
"It wasn't always so polarized," Zian spoke again, her gaze focused on the datapad before her.
"Huh?"
"Hapes," Zian said, setting the datapad down. "It may seem like backstabbing, assassinations, and political intrigue is all we Hapans do to you outsiders. But it wasn't always like that."
"What changed?"
"The Queen Mother before Ni'Korish came from a very big family. It was rumored that her own mother, Ni'Korish's grandmother, made her compete with her sisters for the throne. Nobles sided with whichever sibling they thought was going to win. It was a non-lethal competition that eventually turned lethal once Ni'Korish's mother ascended. One branch of family even developed Force abilities, hence Ni'Korish's

reputation for hunting down Jedi. She was ever fearful that that particular branch of the family would use their abilities to usurp her rule."
"I always did wonder about the Ni'Korish movement. It wasn't until Ta'a Chume that Hapes opened its borders to the outside so why did she hate Jedi so much."
"Now you know. And six generations later, that paranoia persists. Even among the military. I am actually surprised that Hapes hasn't had a civil war in the interim."
"Has there been any attempts to unite Hapes before?"
"Hapes *is* united," Zian said with a quirk of her lips. "If you mean, has there been any attempts to end the infighting? Yes, there's even a graveyard dedicated to such individuals. With the nobility divided, they remain weak and incapable of challenging the Queen Mother for power. No one faction has enough power to get things done, so they use their influence like credits. You help them, they help you. I believe that is what the grandmother of Ni'Korish had in mind when she first instituted the competitions."
"And this has everything to do with the Hapes today?"
"After six generations, Jedi Knight Zekk, the way of Ni'Korish's mother is the only way the nobility and politically inclined know. I am trying to tell you how to think like a Hapan, and not a Jedi. The troops will better connect with you if you do, the nobles will respect you more."
"But I *am* a Jedi."
"Are you? Two of the squads have been engaged," Zian gestured to the readout, changing topics. "Alpha squad is one of them. Gamma is the other."
"Given where I sent them, it makes senses," Zekk answered, keeping an eye on the vital signs of both squads as he shifted through a series of reports. They had been out for over two weeks now, and their status had always occupied a corner of his mind.
"Again, another way you differ from the Hapans. No commander would have ever sent the Zel twins so deep behind enemy lines. The preservation of the Royal Family always comes first."
"They can handle it. They both made it into the Royal Guard after all."
"You are difficult to understand, Jedi Knight Zekk. You are like the Queen Mother, rash and nontraditional. You do not think like a Hapan at all."
"Is that a compliment?"
"And an insult," Zian said. "It is because you do not think like a Hapan that the forces you command are wary of your decisions. It is why the Queen Mother is having a hard time unifying the different factions of

nobility. You cannot just force your outsider way of thinking, your tactics and ways, onto all the men and women who serve under you, and expect them to obey your orders without question. Especially if they had been indoctrinated to believe as they do for over several centuries. If you do not wish to forsake your Jedi ways, then you must become just a little Hapan in thought, if not action."
"What do you suggest?" Zekk finally looked up at the colonel.
"State where your loyalties lie. Are you here as a Jedi, or as a loyal servant of the Queen Mother? Are you here to win this battle for the Consortium, or will you leave once your goals have been accomplished and return to the larger galaxy? The Hapans like to know that their commander is not only competent but actually has a vested interest in their little corner of the galaxy. Once you fall into a category for them, they will know where to place you in their orderly society."
"Which branch of the Royal Intelligence Services are you from?" Zekk said shrewdly, but his question was mostly to cover up the whirlwind of thoughts her question had kicked up. He knew he was a Jedi, but was he here, fighting on this world away from worlds because of that, or because of his feelings to Hapes and what he hoped it stood for; a home?
Zian answered with a ghost of a smile, as if she knew what he was thinking. "Psy-ops. The *Chume* knew that the Killiks would be an enemy unlike any the Hapans have faced before and knew that psychological conditioning of her people would be vital for a victory. You might win physical battles, General. But you can only make our forces believe in the cause they fight for if you believe in Hapes. Only by being Hapan can the Queen Mother create the new Hapes she imagines. Believe in the Hapes *you* want, and they will follow if you make them want that Hapes as well."
They paused as the holo-readout began to emit warning chirps.
"Besh and Enth units are under fire," Zekk noted with a frown, using the aurebesh names for the designated squadrons.
"As are Trill and Nern. At least they're pulling back."
"They must have stumbled upon something big."
"The other units are also coming under attack," Zian commented, watching as the vital signs of the scouting units peaked with adrenaline. "Lef and Zerek just took their first casualties. Do we send in one of our shuttles to pull them out?"
"They're still within range of the Killik anti-air weapons," Zekk shook his head. He reached over and thumbed the communicator. Seconds later, Sanola and Rajade entered the tent. "Is your unit rested up, Jedi Knight Ti?"

"Rested and ready."
"You're going to have to hold the exit vector along the corridor here," Zekk pointed to a location on the map. "Our scouts just kicked over a bug nest and the bugs aren't happy."
"Roger, on our way," Sanola saluted sharply. She and Rajade reversed course and sprinted out of the tent.
"Will that be enough? Alpha and Gamma are heading even deeper into Killik-held territory. If the royal twins are harmed in any way, the already low morale will…"
"They'll make it," Zekk pointed to the other units. "Our primary goal is to evac the others first. We need the intel they'd have gathered."
Watching the vital signs of Taryn's group, Zekk was the first to see the indicators for Taryn fluctuate. His first thoughts were that the red-haired warrior woman had been injured. But then the indicator appeared to pulsate at steady intervals…as if communicating a message.
"Standard Spec-Ops tactic if the comms are insecure," Zian promptly noted, frowning slightly. "Lady Zel's team is about to go dark."
Only a second later, the vital signs for the entire squad flatlined and the entire squad disappeared from the grid. Even with Zian's warning, Zekk's heart couldn't help but skip a beat as he watched both Taryn and Trista's signals pulsate in warning red. A split second later, Gamma squad blinked out a similar message, before they too went dark.
"Vev's in trouble," Zian gestured to the readout. "They've just lost two, another three are injured. From the way Besh and Trill squads are circling away, the Killiks must have cut Vev off from the others."
"Sigma's in a similar situation. And it looks like Trill is being corralled back towards the mountains." Zekk eyed the readout. As he did, a memory of his time as a Joiner echoed through his mind. Exhaling sharply, he promptly keyed the communication's system. "All recon units, go dark! Go dark! The Killiks can pick up the signals from your locator beacons!"
"Sir?" Zian looked to him in alarm.
"They're bugs, Colonel," Zekk said, heart pounding as each of the recon teams turned off their transponders. "Bugs have antennae. Even if the transponders are broadcasting on a low-band frequency, the bugs can still detect the electrical transmissions. That's how they knew where the teams were and why the teams were being flanked."
"That explains how the Killiks knew how to target our commanding officers during their opening counterattack," Zian said analytically.

"The officers were broadcasting their orders over the comms, and the Killiks just headed for the sources of the transmissions."
"At least now we know," Zekk murmured, casting his eyes back towards Alpha unit's last known location. "Still doesn't help the units trapped behind enemy lines."
A light began blinking on the side of the holotable, drawing the attention of the two planners. Seconds later, a new image appeared over the terrain, a very recognizable image.
"Is that…"
"The *Dragon Queen,*" Zian finished, looking gobsmacked.
Apparently, Tenel Ka was tired of being told by her advisors that she had to wait onboard her ship, and decided to test her flagship's atmospheric capabilities.
The comm-system pinged and Tenel Ka's voice filled the tent. "*This is the Dragon Queen to Zadaria Command and outlying Hapan forces. We are assisting in the evacuation of the reconnaissance teams. Commanders of said units, please reactivate your transponders if you are unable to complete your withdraw back to the Dathomiri Jedi fallback points. Zadaria Command, make ready for our arrival, the situation in orbit has changed."*
The very distant sounds of the Battle Dragon's turbolaser batteries unleashing punishing blasts into the Killik positions filtered through the air like far-off thunder. Above the holotable, both Zekk and Zian exchanged incredulous looks.
"She definitely knows how to make an entrance," Zekk remarked with a weak laugh.
"Ta'a Chume would have just razed the planet from orbit," Zian shrugged, trying hard not to look impressed. "Teneniel would have sent peace envoys. I guess the current Queen Mother is a compromise between the two."
Though it looked as if the Queen Mother had saved the day, Zekk frowned at the holotable. "Both Gamma and Alpha are still dark. The Queen Mother won't be able to find them."
"Then, as you said earlier, you'll just have to trust that they make their way back here."
"Yeah," Zekk breathed, closing his eyes and sending a silent prayer to the Force. "I guess I will.
(-==-(IV)-==-)
When it rained on Zadaria, it really poured, and it didn't even have to do with the miserable weather. The scouting teams dropped off by Tenel Ka carried with them a plethora of information, achieving their objectives for the most part.

Unfortunately the information they had managed to uncover in the couple weeks of scouting had been wholly of the bad sort. Even Zekk had been surprised and a bit disheartened when he read the briefings. The relative ease at which the information had been obtained had also led him to believe that the Killiks had *let* them gain the info for the sole purpose of demoralizing every Hapan on the planet.

Gamma squad, the other unit sent deep behind enemy lines, had returned and reported the existence of three Killik queens. That was three separate hives of two to three million bugs each. Way more than even the Corellians had estimated. This wasn't counting the entire population of the Zadaria system, made into Joiners during the Killiks initial conquest.

And the news continued to pile up.

Taryn and Trista's squad was still missing, now a week and a half overdue. Zekk was getting a taste of what it must have felt like for them when *he* had gone missing on Relephon. Needless to say, he didn't appreciate the feeling at all; especially with his 'improvement in relations' with Taryn.

The other scouting teams had recordings of many, many types of Killiks; over a dozen in all. The Killiks had somehow absorbed swarms of blast, razor, and thud-bugs brought over by the Yuuzhan Vong into their ranks. Those bugs had been deadly enough when mindlessly launched by the alien invaders, but with a hive-mind now directing them, they were downright lethal.

And the topper. Tenel Ka had personally let the ground units know that they'd be on their own for the time being. Apparently a neighboring Hapan battle group had been utterly decimated by an overwhelming Killik fleet, a fleet that was now heading their way. Said fleet supposedly outnumbered the Hapan fleet ten to one, with the only intel available from a comm-buoy that had been ejected from the defeated battle group just seconds before they had been destroyed. The Hapans had succeeded in drawing Killik attention to themselves, but now needed to survive the added threat.

If they didn't kill each other first.

"We cannot just ignore the fact that Taryn and Trista Zel are still out there, sir!" One of the Hapan captains hissed at Colonel Zian. "If we were to launch our attack now, the risk to them…"

"Both Sergeant and Corporal Zel knew the risk," the colonel replied in her maddeningly calm voice. "Jedi Knight Zekk personally assigned them to their sector with full knowledge of the dangers such an action would place them in. We cannot halt our attack for just one squad, no matter who is in it."

"With all due respect, that's bantha fodder!" Another captain growled. "With the Zels out of the picture you and those who supported Queen Mother Ta'a…"
"Captain," Zekk interrupted her tiredly, rubbing a hand over his face and the two-week-old beard that had formed during his stay on the planet. "This isn't helping."
"General?" the captain frowned. "I would have thought you being a supporter of the current Queen Mother you'd understand the dangers of…"
"Right now, we're on a battlefield of a different sort," Zekk pressed, keeping his own feelings locked away thanks to his Jedi training. Regardless of how much he wanted to agree with the captain, he also knew that it wasn't the right choice to make. He had an army to lead and he couldn't go jetting off on some hastily planned rescue mission no matter how much he wanted to. "Arguing about politics, about who's loyal to who, isn't going to get us anywhere. We've all lost friends and allies. You may not know it, but Major Salis, under Colonel Rais here, was among those of Gamma squad who did not return from the scouting mission. The Zels are no different than Major Salis and the two dozen other scouts that died giving us the intel we need. On a battlefield, the blasterbolt doesn't care if it hits a private or a general, a beggar or a princess. Sending more people after the Zels will be an unnecessary risk to their lives given the number of enemies we're facing. I'm quite certain that both Taryn and Trista will agree with me."
Despite his words, it was clear by the looks of betrayal on many of the captains in the room, that he had just lost bucket-loads of their respect. Even Zian appeared to roll her eyes; at least that was the mental impression he was getting from the Hapan colonel he had just backed. Before the silence could stretch to uncomfortable levels, however, Major Vessau cleared his throat.
"Given the timeframe we have before the enemy fleet arrives, we must do our best to establish a secure zone on the ground. We cannot be on our backfoot when the Killik reinforcements arrive."
"Which is why we are now proceeding with our planned offensive," Colonel Rais nodded in acknowledgement. "With the information gathered by Jedi Knight Zekk's scouting parties, we have a fair amount of understanding of what we're up against. We're deploying ballistic shields and armor to counter Killik projectile rifles, and blast-resistant fields to negate the chemical explosives they employ. Our air-speeder force will drop ground-penetrating bombs in advance to knock out the Killik tunnels, and our armored divisions will take out the initial resistance. We're ready to go."

That meeting had occurred two days ago, and now Zekk was on the frontlines, watching through electrobinoculars as the Hapan V-wing air-speeder force bombarded several kilometers with their specialized ordinance. A light rain was falling, the skies a dark gray and threatening worse. But it was bearable for the moment. A split second after the bombs were deployed and clods of dirt were blown into the air and tracks of land caved in.

Killiks of varying types immediately began to emerge from the ground, not happy with having their tunnels destroyed. They got even unhappier when the Hapan hovertanks opened fire, sending bug bits flying high into the air.

So far so good.

Then rockets burst through the soil from different locations, shooting high into the sky, before arcing back towards the ground at super-sonic speeds. Fortunately light travels much faster than sound, and the Hapan laser-defenses immediately began plucking the rockets out of the air. Another horde of Killik soldiers burst out of the ground and began a suicidal charge towards the line of tanks. Anti-infantry repeater cannons and blasters burst out in a withering storm, cutting down the charge with many hundreds of meters to spare.

"General?" One of the recently promoted captains, now a major, looked to him. "Do we send in the troops?"

"Phase one of the plan only, major," Zekk directed.

"Yes, sir." The major held up her comlink and began issuing orders.

In the mean time, Zekk lowered his electrobinoculars and took a seat on the rocky outcropping he was standing on. Taking a deep breath, he stretched his Force abilities out into the bombarded field. Because the Killiks could sense the electronic transmissions from their comlinks, it stood to reason that they could also understand the messages being sent. In order to avoid another disaster, he and Colonel Rais had come up with an alternative plan, use that knowledge against the Killiks.

As the major at his side began rattling off orders to move out to countless divisions, Zekk envisioned the Hapan army tromping over the dead Killiks, bypassing the outer perimeter of Killik-controlled land and venturing even deeper. He might not have been as skilled in mental manipulation as the Horns were, but he was no slouch either. It also helped that he could still feel a small link to the Killiks on the planet thanks to his prolonged Joining, and was able to use that link to his advantage.

Coupled with the orders being given that seemingly confirmed these troop movements, the ruse was more than successful. Only minutes

after projecting the Hapan force on the move into the Killik consciousness, the ground shifted once more.
This time five giant beetle creatures emerged, growling and shaking off the dirt from their shining blue and green carapaces. From the holes in the ground they had left, a thick swarm of bugs emerged, racing through the air and towards the Hapan lines.
The minute the Killiks exposed themselves, however, the V-wings returned and proceeded to drop ordinance directly onto them. The smaller swarms disappeared in blazes of flame. The larger beetles just seemed to get angry.
And then the tanks opened fire once more; five flame-burnt beetles versus several hundred Hapan tanks with laser weaponry.
The beetles, no matter that they were the size of a three-story house, didn't win.
Silence descended, smoking bug corpses and small craters the only things that could be seen in the grassy plain.
Zekk stretched out with the Force, but didn't sense any active threat.
"Phase two, major."
"Understood." A coded message was sent out to the ground units, and the heavy hover-tanks began to press forward, for real this time. Behind them were squads of infantry, all eyeing the ground with nervous anticipation.
"Seismic sensors aren't picking up anything," a comm-officer announced. Intricate sensors kept track of any underground movement to prevent any unexpected attack from below.
"Mobile shield generators holding steady." The vehicles along the perimeter of the formation were generating a bubble of protective energy to ward off any more missile strikes. The ionized nature of the field also meant that it would play havoc on the nervous system of any living thing that came in contact with it. This prevented the Killiks from rushing the occupants inside, at least not without first stunning themselves in the process.
"Have the forces hold position after another half kilometer," Zekk directed, frowning. Everything had worked out just as planned. Which, in his experience, was never good. He climbed into the speeder hovering next to him. "How is the second prong doing?"
"From the message, their advance is flawless as well. Colonel Rais has ordered a similar halting of the forces." The comm-officer supplied.
"What are you thinking, sir?" The major spoke up again.
"Even with the portable shield generators, our forces are currently out in the open," Zekk gestured. "The same terrain we used against the

Killik can now be used against us. Sure we might have splattered a couple hundred bugs, but this is just their outer perimeter."
Just then, Zekk felt a surge of danger in the Force and immediately yanked his electrobinoculars up. Tiny, familiar, explosions were erupting all throughout the Hapan lines.
"*Nimbo Nimbae*," the major paled, muttering the Hapan words for 'Assassin Bug.'
"The camouflaged spiders?" Zekk asked sharply.
The major nodded once, her gaze still focused through the electrobinoculars she held. "But it looks like the ionized field has kept a majority of them stunned long enough for the troops to deal with them. It's a good thing you halted the advance when you did, General."
"This is nothing," Zekk gestured to the two kilometers they had just taken. "Wait until we start threatening their nesting sites. Then we'll have real problems on our hands. For now, set up the FOB and make sure our sensors are in place. If I were the Killiks, I would use this moment to send in their Joiners, infiltrate our position. Quarantine any squad or straggler returning. We've won one battle, major. Now we need to win the war."
(-==-(Chapter End)-==-)

Jaina
(-==-(I)-==-)
The sign of a successful infiltration and sabotage mission is that you're well-clear of the blast radius when the charges go off. It also helps if the local protectors haven't detected your presence and you have a clear escape plan. But when your target is guarded by legions of telepathic bugs, and the entire star system you're in is controlled by said telepathic bugs, then things get a bit harder. And when said bugs were guided by commands given to them by the Force…well…things kind of got really unfair.
"Go! Go! Go!" Jaina yelled, encouraging those running with her as unstable arcs of energy raced up and down a series of recently-rendered unstable generators. Klaxon alarms were blaring most annoyingly from behind, lighting up the night's sky in reds and yellows The warm air filled with barbed spears and laser-fire as the power-plant's protectors charged after them.
"*Warning, reactor critical. Loss of cooling levels on all tiers. Catastrophic explosion imminent, suggest all personnel retreat to a safe distance."*
A Killik-controlled Vagaari saucer swooped in from above, guns blazing, sending chunk of the rocky soil flying all around them. The

mountainous terrain and late hour meant that the saucer had to swoop dangerously low to get a proper firing solution, but the pilot didn't seem to care for his own health at all. Another group of Killik-controlled individuals actually ran up towards them from a lower mountain path while the fighter was still firing, reinforcing just how suicidal a Joiner could be.
Vagaari tracked vehicles roared out of the power-plant's hangar, exploding shells raining down on the fleeing saboteurs.
Taking cover behind a larger boulder, Jaina reached out with the Force and sent the next few shells flying up into the air. The low-flying Vagaari saucer came into contact with the explosive shells and was promptly blown from the sky.
"{Come on, Jaina!}" Future Vagaari Grand Overseer Elansh yelled, firing a Vagaari blaster rifle at the enraged Joiners.
Jaina quickly abandoned her position just before another explosive shell turned it into gravel. The shockwave sent her flying, but both Elansh and Feesa quickly grabbed an arm each and hauled Jaina back to her feet.
"Save the heroics for when we need them," Feesa said in sharp rebuke. "If you haven't forgotten, we're trying to outrun a several kiloton blast."
"How far until the tunnels?" Jaina asked, still woozy from her brief flight. In the darkness of night it was hard to locate the even darker tunnel that was their escape route.
"{Not far,}" Elansh said, firing another shot over her shoulder. "{The other members of our squad should already be there.}"
Another nearby explosion peppered them with the rocky soil that was prevalent in the mountainous area they were in.
"There!" Feesa yelled, pointing to a cave entrance. A handful of other Vagaari warriors were gesturing frantically, and for good reason, as the mass of Killik-controlled forces raced towards them.
The trio staggered into the cave, the nearest Vagaari warrior quickly ushered them towards the back. He detonated a smaller charge to cave in the opening, then rushed to rejoin the still fleeing group. They had gotten a fair ways into the winding cave passage when an earth-shaking rumble shook the entire cave in a violent and deafening crash. Dust and rocks fell from the ceiling, the walls cracking from the sudden pressure. The ground vibrated to such an extent that it threw the group off their feet. The chaos lasted for a very long handful of seconds, most the time spent fearing that the cave would collapse down onto them.

Eventually, however, the rumbling stopped and an eerie silence replaced it. Cautiously, the team picked themselves off the ground and shook off the excess dirt and gravel that had fallen on them.
"Everyone okay?" Jaina called out.
"{I am…fine.}" Elansh replied, helping one of the Vagaari warriors to his feet. "{At least the cave held.}"
"You seemed sure it would when we planned to blow up the reactor," Jaina said with a raised eyebrow.
Elansh blushed and answered in Basic. "I thought the plan to detonate the reactor while we were still in range of the blast radius was one of your jokes. By the time I realized you weren't kidding, it was kind of too late to worry about such things."
"Well," Jaina dusted herself off. "We're all still alive, so that's goo…"
"Jedi Solo?" Feesa tilted her head in concern.
"Maez," Jaina breathed, her eyes fluttering close. "He's on the way."
"The dark Jedi that hates your family?" Feesa asked.
"Hate is an understatement, but yes."
"Do we continue our plan?"
Jaina nodded at the Chiss. "Yes. He's still a little way out. We should be able to reach the summit before he arrives."
"All we need to worry about is if your stories hold any truth in them," Feesa said, looking pointedly at the Vagaari with them.
"{All the old stories say that if the *Vaga'ari* are ever in need of aid, that the Temple of the First Ones will provide them salvation}." Elansh reverted to her native tongue.
"{Don't forget that some of the stories say that the Temple of the First Ones will be the death of all *Vaga'ari*.}" One of the other warriors interjected. "{That is why we had yearly sacrifices to the machines that protect the temple.}"
"{Superstitions started by the priests to maintain their status,}" Elansh shook her head.
"{You are young. You cannot know that for certain.}"
"{That is what my father told me, and he's in charge of the priests,}" Elansh countered.
"You have to admit, it does seem kind of fairy-tale like," Feesa said dubiously.
"Feesa, we've been over this before," Jaina sighed. "This is their planet, so let's go by their playbook."
"Jedi Solo, surely you can see how ludicrous this plan is. We're heading to one of the most isolated places on the planet, making ourselves perfect targets, all because of some millennia old story that *might* help us?"

Jaina smiled wanly, fully understanding Feesa's concerns. It wasn't like those thoughts had crossed her mind either, but the Force was telling her they were on the right track. Of course, she doubted Feesa would appreciate being told that some all-power invisible energy had agreed that their trek to a mystical temple was the right move. Even then, Jaina still had that niggling doubt that she was missing something. As the group rechecked their supplies and readied themselves to continue their journey, her mind flashed back to when they had planned the mission.

"The Temple of the First Ones?"

"Said to be the origins of the Vaga'ari," Elansh nodded. It was their first day on the ground, and they were brainstorming ways to be flashy and keep Maez and Welk's attention. "Our architecture, even the shapes of our ships, are all derived from the temple. There is not an origin story about the Vaga'ari that does not include the temple."

"Looking at this map, the mountain range this temple is in is right in the middle of five Killik-controlled cities," Feesa frowned. "And I don't mean your usual thousand-person settlement, but places with populations in the millions. We'd have to be suicidal to even go near here."

"We want to cause a lot of damage though," Jaina said calmly. "Blowing up way-stations in the country-side is going to just be an annoyance. We want to give Maez and Welk a reason to come after our group and our group alone."

"But why head for this temple anyways? It's not like the Joiners are going to care about its religious significance anymore."

"There are secrets passed down through the Miskara and Grand Overseer," Elansh spoke up. "They speak of the temple as a fount of power that only the chosen can unlock. My grandfather received his vision of a united Vaga'ari Empire after making a pilgrimage to the temple, so there must be some truth in those stories."

"But do we have any idea what this fount of power is, or if we can even use it?" Feesa pressed. "Before we wade neck-deep in enemy bodies, I want to be sure that all the effort will be worth it. If this power is so great, why haven't the Vagaari used it before?"

"We've never known how," Elansh shook her head. "And like I said, they're mostly stories, tales. If there's a chance we can help the fleets by unleashing this power, however, would it not be worth it?"

"What exactly is in this temple?" Jaina asked.

"No one knows for sure," Elansh replied. "Only my grandfather stepped beyond the outer sanctum, and whatever he saw shook him into believing the Vaga'ari had to change. I myself have only entered the

outer sanctum, just like the other priests. There is a computer at the entryway that prevents access further into the temple."
"A computer?"
"An image of a First One appears and asks questions," Elansh continued. "Every time some takes his test, they are deemed inferior and denied access."
"Your grandfather passed the test though."
"Yes," Elansh nodded. "But I know not how."
"So we're not even sure that what's on the other side of this barrier is even worth the trip?" Feesa frowned. "You have to see where I'm coming from, Jedi Solo. I am from a world of science and facts. This is all sounding like a bunch of superstitious nonsense to me."
"The Force sounds like a bunch of superstitious nonsense to a lot of people," Jaina replied.
"True."
"Look on the bright side. There are a half dozen main power stations between us and these mountains. A couple in the mountains themselves. We can at least blow a couple of them up on our way. If we knock out power to the cities, we can definitely get their attention."
"And do we have an escape vector? If we go up there, then the Killiks will know where we are. I don't know about you, but being surrounded by a million plus Joiners and Killik warriors isn't my idea of a good time."
"We all know the risks, Feesa," Jaina said calmly. "Since I'll be using the Force to constantly broadcast our location to Maez and Welk, hiding or planning for an escape route is pointless. Once we blow up the first power plant, the only way to survive is if we keep moving."
"And I can actually help with that," Elansh spoke up nervously, looking reluctant to get between an angry Chiss and a Jedi. "The power plants may provide energy to the cities, but they themselves are fueled by thermal vents beneath the planet's surface."
"Go on."
"A network of geothermal tunnels and vents are spread out all around the mountain range. Some of our scientists speculated that the Temple of the First Ones was actually built on top of a volcano and that the tunnels are left over magma tubes. If it was a volcano though, it has been dormant for thousands of years. Anyways, the tunnels and caves are not well mapped because they have been speculated to be somehow connected to the temple itself and the Vaga'ari are naturally fearful of disturbing the temple."
"See, problem solved," Jaina said lightly.

"Well, since I can't think of anything more insane, we might as well go with your plan," Feesa sighed. "I already know I'm going to regret it though."
"That's what I love about you Chiss, your eternal optimism."
"We have about another hour, maybe two to hike, straight up," Elansh spoke, bringing Jaina from her thoughts. "Are you sure we can beat Maez to the top?"
"He's at least a day away," Jaina confirmed with the Force. "But he's definitely determined to kill me. Personally. Fun bloodlust I'm sensing."
"Great," Feesa slung her pack over her shoulders. "Any sign of the other one?" Welk?"
"As far as I can tell, he's staying put wherever he is. The other groups have kept a low enough profile to not draw his attention."
"That's one thing that's gone our way at least."
"With the Vagaari fleet due any day now, let's hope the other parts of this mission stay agreeable too," Jaina gestured to the smooth black walls of the cave passage before them. "All we have right now is an uphill hike in an old lava tube, should be fun."
Feesa looked sidelong at Jaina. "We definitely have very different definitions of fun."
(-==-(II)-==-)
The climb up the mountain from inside was slow and laborious. More than once they came across a collapsed portion of the tunnel and had to break out the grappling hooks and ascend an otherwise impassible shaft. They were likewise aided by Chiss-supplied hand-held ground-penetrating radar units, as well as Jaina's lightsaber. What the team couldn't traverse was made passable by Jaina's all-purpose rock-cutting saber. Unfortunately this meant that the 'few hour' hike stretched itself out to something a tad bit longer.
"Is it just me or has it been getting warmer?" Jaina tugged at the collar of her combat suit, a bead of sweat rolling down the side of her face.
"It is not just you," Feesa shook her head. More inclined to the icy cold climate of Csilla and similar Chiss worlds, Feesa looked decidedly uncomfortable at the unexpected heat flooding the tunnel. She looked to Elansh. "And you are certain that this volcano is dormant?"
"For millennia," Elansh confirmed, looking nervous.
"{Jedi Solo, do your senses tell you anything?}" one of the Vagaari warriors asked.
Jaina took a moment to stretch her senses out, then promptly frowned.
"Well, the good news is we're heading in the right direction."
"And the bad?" Feesa raised an eyebrow.
"There are a lot of Killiks in the direction we're headed."

"How much?"
"A lot," Jaina shrugged. "Force isn't that specific. Especially with these bugs. But it doesn't look like they care we're nearby. At least I'm not sensing any hostility or murderous rage from them."
"Is it wise to continue our current course then?" Elansh asked.
"Well, if we go back the way we came we'll have an army of angry Joiners who *are* looking for us. We are in the middle of a mountain surrounded by Killik-controlled cities."
"You have a point," Elansh conceded.
The group pressed on, frowning in worry as the temperature continued to rise. It wasn't just the heat, but a continuous rush of air that made the heat seem almost furnace-like with every passing second. They continued to crawl and climb through the narrow lava tubes until they found themselves at another dead end.
"Feesa?" Jaina jerked a hand at the wall in front of them.
The Chiss ran the hand-held scanner over the surface. "Should be fine. Radar is only picking up a meter of rock between here and a large pocket of air."
Jaina activated her saber and proceeded to cut a person-sized hole in the black-colored rock before her. After several long seconds, the circular piece of rock fell backwards and out of sight. In its place, however, the group was bathed by a heat much stronger than before, and a hellish red light washed out the dim glow of their glow sticks. That wasn't all. The deathly quiet of the millennia-old lava tube was shattered by a cacophony of screeches, fluttering of wings, and all manner of clatters and clacks.
As one, the group involuntarily shrunk back from the newly made passageway. Jaina was the first to recover, edging towards the opening and timidly sticking her head out to peek at the other side. What she saw had her jaw drop and her eyes grow round in parts fear and disbelief.
"What is it?" Feesa whispered in a hushed voice, moving to the circular threshold for a look of her own. Elansh was next to follow, becoming similarly frozen in place as the other two at the sight that greeted them.
"That…" Elansh wheezed. "Is a lot of bugs."
Jaina had apparently cleaved her way into a massive central cavern of sorts. The walls were lined with stone pipes and non-functional machinery, and the cavern seemed to drop down as far as the mountain was tall. But what had the leaders of the strike team in shock was what they could see rising up from the cavern floor, and what was on the floor itself.

"I think we just found a Killik nest," Jaina swallowed, her mouth dry. Spiraling up all around them like mutated beehives were countless, shiny, black Killik mounds. Like a forest, some of the mounds continued to stretch to the roof of the cavern, others were still smaller in size, but still dwarfed any living thing. The cavern was large enough for many dozens of them, a yawning chasm filled with these insectoid buildings. Fluttering about and carrying out their business were thousands of hive-guardians, some carrying supplies to and fro, others patching more spittle and igneous rock to the lower spiraling structures. Below them, crawling all over the rocky ground and the beehive-like structures was a literal mat of worm-like insects. These creatures writhed and squirmed, feasting on entombed bodies of various races or being herded by the hive-guardians. One thing was very clear, however, 'a lot' in this case meant hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of Killiks.
"This deep in the mountains, will the tractor strike even hurt them?" Feesa said worriedly, turning to the Vagaari soldiers.
They all shook their heads in negative. "[Even if the fleets were to turn their tractors onto the mountains, which they probably won't given its religious significance, the mountains would shield these Killiks from harm.]"
"And when we leave, thinking we've secured the planet, we'll have millions of Killik warriors swarming out of wherever they come from," Jaina muttered. "This isn't the only volcano in this mountain range, is it?"
"[One of five dormant ones, Jedi Solo,]" the Vagaari commando in charge of the two units with them replied.
"And they're all composite type volcanoes?"
"[Part of the same caldera below, yes,]" one of the more scientifically inclined Vagaari commandos replied.
"What are you thinking?" Elansh asked softly, somehow managing to tear her gaze away from the hive of activity below.
"In this nest alone, given the size of it, there has to be close to a million Killiks in it. Remember Agent Reya's report? These things need only one or two years to reach maturity, and they can be raised two, three million strong at a time. Multiply what you see here by the other four dormant volcanoes, and that's more than a lot of bugs. If the tractor attack won't do anything, we have to before it's too late." Feesa breathed out slowly. "I agree. But short of causing the volcanoes to erupt…we're not going to cause the volcanoes to erupt…are we?"

"Elansh did say that this volcano is rumored to be the heating system for the temple," Jaina said softly. "And if there is a heating system, there's a way to…*over* heat something."
Elansh gasped. "{We're really going to try and incinerate several million lifeforms all at once? This isn't even counting the Joiners in the cities surrounding the mountain range. Those cities have millions more Vagaari and slave races in them.}"
Jaina closed her eyes, her expression becoming detached, almost devoid of emotion "Those people will die in the tractor attack anyways. At least this way their deaths will have meant something. How much further do we have to ascend?"
Feesa checked her hand-held computer. "We're still nearly a kilometer from the peak. If we want to reach the surface before daylight, we need to hurry."
"Ogle the millions of bugs later," Jaina agreed. "Besides, it doesn't look like they care we're here at the moment. Let's not give them a reason to change their minds."
"{There, the ridge up there]," one of the Vagaari warriors pointed to another opening in the cavern wall on the opposite side of the chasm. "{Notice how the old pipes disappear into it? It must be a continuation of the maintenance tunnels.}"
"And of course it has to be on the other side of the yawning chasm," Jaina grumbled. "Too far for grappling guns. We're going to have to get there the old fashioned way."
"What's that?"
"Feesa, Elansh. Did you know that Vagaari and Chiss can fly without any starship?"
"What are you…Jedi Solo, don't you even…!" Feesa had to choke off her scream, lest she draw attention to herself as Jaina picked her up using the Force and floated her across the yawning, bug-filled cavern below. Flailing in panic for the first few dozen meters, eventually, Feesa settled for folding her arms in front of her chest and glaring at Jaina as the human woman levitated her across certain death.
In the interim, the Vagaari all watched with gaping mouths as the image of the Chiss floated and bobbed suspended by nothing but the Force.
"Place was wider than I thought. Going to be a little short," Jaina muttered under her breath, sweat dripping down her forehead both from the exertion of levitating Feesa across the room, but also the dry desert heat that continued to assail her. Jaina sent a mental warning to Feesa, received several Chiss curses in reply, and then used the last of her concentration to 'toss' Feesa the rest of the distance.

Feesa flailed around for a moment as her body was hurled the last fifty meters through the air. Like a ball going through a hoop, her now tiny form disappeared into the rocky wall of the opposite side of the cavern. Panting, Jaina wiped her forehead on her sleeve, and beamed happily at the stunned Vagaari warriors. "Hold those thoughts. I'll be right with you."

She proceeded to leap-frog the Killik hives that spired up all around her until she was half-way between the two points. The Vagaari all continued to blink, nonplussed by what they had just seen and what they realized would soon occur. Their worst fears were confirmed when they heard Jaina's voice echo in their heads.

'*So, who wants to be next?*'

(-==-(III)-==-)

"Never, ever again!" Feesa, still fuming, tromped towards the end of the tunnel. The cool, fresh air from the outside was providing a much needed relief to the furnace-like temperatures they were emerging from. "Toss me about like a…like a…"

Feesa trailed off as the vista they had emerged out into distracted her from the indignity of being tossed through a Killik-infested cavern. She wasn't the only one stunned into silence by the breathtaking view that stretched out before them.

"I have been here twice before," Elansh murmured. "But the sight is not something one would grow tired of.

A brisk, clean air whipped through their soot-covered clothing and hair as they stood upon the black volcanic rock of the mountain. They were on the lip of a massive volcanic crater, a crater larger enough to fit several squadrons of fighters inside, side-by-side and stacked on top of one and other. On the other side of the narrow walkway was the very long way down. The sun was just beginning to rise, turning the layer of fog and smog many meters below into an ocean of seemingly liquid bronze.

"Wow," Jaina breathed, grateful to be inhaling something that wasn't factory-polluted or stuffy sulfuric cave air.

A clear path wrapped along the lip of the crater, weaving in and out, undulating up and down, around wind-worn volcanic rock. The roundish black rock that seemed to bubble up all around them glinted in the unfiltered light of the sun. And at the very end of the path a short ways away, the group could see their destination.

Even standing almost a half-kilometer away and obscured by all the rising and falling of the path, the details of the Temple of the First Ones stood out in the morning light. It was a towering structure carved of a gray stone that had to have been quarried from some distant location.

The bottom was saucer-like in shape, the resemblance to the saucer-like Vagaari fighters evident in the slight ridges and architectural oddities that could be seen even from afar. The centerpiece of the temple, however, was an oval-like spire that rose up from the center of the saucer-like base and stretched up towards the heavens. A step-design decorated this central spire along its front and back, making it truly look like a pathway to the stars.
"So that's the Temple of the First Ones?" Feesa said, looking puzzled.
"Is there something wrong?" Elansh blinked.
"The architecture, Jedi Solo, you recognize it too, don't you? The Ascendancy has catalogued several buildings on different worlds with the exact same features."
"Now that you mention it," Jaina used the Force to help her get a better look. "It does look a lot like that building on the water world Jagged and I stumbled across a couple of years ago. Elansh, you said that this temple pre-dates your people?"
"It does," Elansh nodded. They began the short trek to the temple. "The technology and computers inside were said to be the work of divinities before our people evolved beyond that notion. Even in recent times, we've been unable to gain full control of the systems."
"Well, I haven't met a computer system that hasn't liked me," Jaina said. "Maybe this computer intelligence will find me acceptable. Of course, if it doesn't, we'll have traveled all this way just to enjoy the view."
As the group neared the entry ramp, the communicator Elansh was carrying chose that moment to chime. Given how all the strike teams were operating on comm-silence, the message could only be from one source.
"{This is the Grand Overseer,}" Elansh shrugged sheepishly at Jaina's raised eyebrows, then held the comm-link up to her ear to listen to the reply. When the message was given, Elansh looked determinedly at the others. "Our fleets will be here in another three hours. They're preparing the final jumps now."
"Best we keep the dark Jedi busy then," Feesa said in response.
"I don't think we'll have any trouble with that," Jaina pointed to the sky just as a shadow passed over them.
A Vagaari transport of some sorts flew by overhead, making one pass over the temple before settling down at the apex of the ovaloid tower.
"Maez?" Feesa looked to Jaina.
"Maez," Jaina confirmed, her head still craned back to look up at the very top of the temple.

"How will we proceed?" Elansh asked nervously. After all, it was well known that Maez had single-handedly bested a battalion of the Vagaari's finest warriors.
"First we have to get into the temple," Feesa gestured to the opening at the top of the ramp. A shimmering barrier of yellow energy flickered in the morning light, keeping the entrance impassible.
"Leave that to us," Elansh gestured to herself, regaining some confidence. "The barrier's coded to our dual voices, and we use a special chant to gain access. It is said the chant is in the language of the First Ones and is a praise to their power and might. Father taught me the words when I was old enough, and all pilgrims learn them when they make their trip here. It'll take a while though."
"The show's all yours then," Jaina stepped aside. "Praise away."
The other fifteen Vagaari followed Elansh up the ramp. There they knelt around what looked like a stone fire pit and they clasped their hands together. They began to chant in a rhythmic language that was very different from their native tongue, their voices growing in strength as they did. They occasionally reached out over the firepit, before drawing their hands back into themselves.
To those who couldn't feel the Force, the Vagaari looked to be seated in an inane hour-long superstitious ritual. But Jaina could feel a tangible shift in the Force energies surrounding them. As the yellow field of energy began to flicker, her eyes grew round in shock.
"Stars! The shield isn't voice-locked, it's Force-locked!"
"Jaina?" Feesa asked.
"Somehow the temple machinery is tapping into their life-forces," Jaina said in disbelief, feeling the currents in the Force continue to change. She took a step forward, but then stopped herself. "The Force in the area went from natural and peaceful to dark side and hungry all at once. It's a sacrifice, give up a part of your life and you can gain access. I don't know how it's possible though. These ancient machines shouldn't be able to use the Force."
"Should we stop them?" Feesa said, her concern for Elansh and the Vagaari surprising even herself.
"No, it's too late," Jaina breathed. "And I think…even if we didn't, we wouldn't be able to enter the temple without this."
The ritual continued on, the Vagaari seemingly unaware of what was taking place as they continued to prostrate themselves before the firepit. Then, after several long minutes, the flame in the pit suddenly ignited. A purple fire danced within, and the yellow barrier barring entry into the temple finally disappeared.

"It's open," a sweat-covered and exhausted looking Elansh smiled with her mouths.
"How do you feel?" Feesa asked, cautiously walking up the ramp to the Vagaari.
"Achy," Elansh shrugged. "All pilgrims find themselves weakened before crossing the threshold. Our scientists think it is because of the vocal strain the ritual places on us. Don't worry, the discomfort should fade."
"I wasn't worried," Feesa said quickly. "I merely did not wish to be trapped inside the temple should you and your people pass out."
"Your concern is appreciated Chiss," Elansh said with a mix of impish mischief and sarcasm.
Feesa looked away, muttering something that was no doubt dark and threatening under her breath.
"So, what can we expect?" Jaina asked as they passed the threshold of the building. She took note of the cathedral-like height of the ceiling and rounded, windowed hallways. Whoever the builders were certainly had a thing for grandiose construction.
"The central computer is located on the roof," Elansh explained. "Well, at least the terminal is. The bowels of the temple hold the mainframes we could not reach, the ones protected by the program that judges us. Oh, and there are also the Krayt dragons."
Jaina and Feesa again stopped in their tracks. "The what?"
"Krayt dragons," Elansh repeated. "The Yuuzhan Vong gifted three of them to us to seal the alliance between our peoples. They were then put in stasis and guard the temple against any unwanted intruders. The dragons were said to be their finest in biological alternations. I believe one was even called a Greater Krayt dragon, though I haven't seen it myself."
"The Yuuzhan Vong shaped them?" Jaina asked blankly.
"From what I understand," Elansh nodded. "The dragons were modified so that they spit acid and have poisonous bites. There were a few other modifications too. I don't know the specifics, but we don't have to worry. Like I said, the dragons are kept in stasis. It was generally assumed that the priests that reside in the temple would have enough warning to release the fields in the event of an intrusion."
"And where would the priests be now?" Feesa said pointedly.
"They…" the young teenage Vagaari paled. "They probably would have become Joiners. The only way that troopship could have landed on the roof is if they had deactivated the upper forcefields."
"Do you at least know where the Krayts are?" Jaina placed a calming hand on Elansh's shoulder.

"One is set up to roam the halls," Elansh gestured to the rounded hallways on either side of them. "One should be on the roof. The Greater Krayt is said to have been stored in the bowels of the temple."
"Don't we have a deranged Joiner Jedi on the roof too?" Feesa spoke.
"Yup," Jaina nodded. "Which one do you want to face, a Vong-modified Krayt dragon who's probably very hungry, or the deranged fallen Jedi? I'll get whatever you don't choose."
"Can't you just fight both?" Elansh asked hopefully.
"Isn't this *your* homeworld?" Jaina shot back.
The group rounded another corner, and once more came to a halt.
"We found the hallway roamer," Feesa remarked, holding up her blaster uncertainly.
At the opposite end of the hallway, bathed in the morning light streaming in from the continuous window that ran the course of the hallway, was a very unhappy-looking Vong modified Krayt dragon. It noticed the group too, its mutated trio of tails swishing violently in agitation.
Jaina angled Feesa's arm back down. "Don't do that, you'll just get it angry,"
"{Ideas?}" Elansh looked to her people. The fifteen warriors with them glanced at their puny-in-comparison blaster rifles and slug throwers, then at the hungry Krayt dragon, and shook their heads.
"I have one," Jaina stepped forward, holding out both hands towards the dragon. The dragon let out a challenging bellow in turn, stomping at the ground in obvious preparation to charge.
"Jedi magic?"
"More or less," Jaina exhaled, her face a mask of concentration. "Now you see it…"
The beast roared and began to race down the hallway. The worn and ancient flagstones shook and cracked from the monstrous weight, motes of dust and dirt drifting down from the ceiling.
And then, the Krayt dragon was hit from the side by an unseen force and driven straight out the person-sized window in a shower of rocky debris. Even as it emitted one final enraged roar, the group of Vagaari, Feesa as well, hurried to the now gaping hole in the side of the temple and watched the dragon plummet out of sight.
Then as if realizing something, Elansh turned back to Jaina. "You do realize you just demolished a wall that has stood there for many millennia, making a hole in the most sacred of Vagaari buildings."
Jaina's mouth opened and closed several times, before she sheepishly scratched the back of her head. "At least the dragon's gone."

Feesa, who had turned back to hear Jaina's response, frowned. "Are you okay, you're looking a little pale."
"Something about this building," Jaina replied, swaying and resting a hand on the wall opposite of the hole she made. "The dark side is powerful here. Even though that little bit of Jedi magic was tiring, it shouldn't have been *this* tiring."
Then, the stone wall she was leaning against retracted into the ceiling and a guttural yell replaced the sound of grating rock. Off-balance by the sudden shift, and exhausted from her efforts to throw the Krayt Dragon out the window, Jaina was in no position to stop the sudden knife thrust in her direction. Feesa fired her blaster pistol, but the shot was a split second too late. Jaina staggered back the other way, gasping and with a knife embedded in her side.
In the meantime, Joiner Vagaari poured from the open room, all dressed in ceremonial clothing denoting their religious affiliation. Elansh's warriors met the charge head-on, the energy bayonet of their Vagaari blasters being put to vigorous use in the confined space of the large hallway. Feesa showed that she was no slouch with close quarters combat either, using combat techniques the Chiss had developed with the sole purpose of killing Vagaari.
Elansh quickly faded to the back of the formation, reaching out to grip one of Jaina's wrists. "Jedi Solo!"
"Haven't been stabbed in a while," Jaina breathed out a pained grunt. "Forgotten what it felt like."
"The priests use blades coated with neurotoxins," Elansh said urgently. Shaking hands fished through her jumpsuit, and the young teen struggled with one of the pouches. "I…{I have the counter! I just have to find it! I know I have it!}"
"Unless it's horribly lethal, I'm not going to just drop dead," Jaina panted, closing her eyes. Sweat beaded her forehead as she kept a hand over the knife embedded in her. "Relax."
The sounds of blades on blades, of Vagaari battle cries, and of bodies hitting the floor wasn't exactly the most conducive environment for a young teen to relax. Somehow, though Elansh managed to calm herself just enough to pull out a poultice wrapped in a packet of dried leaves.
"Chew on it, quickly!"
Jaina opened one eye and accepted the package. Inside was some type of wood chip glistening with resin. Trusting that Elansh knew what she was talking about, Jaina promptly did as she was told. At the same time, she pulled out a bacta patch and maneuvered the knife back out of her body. Biting down on the wood chip, a bitter tang flooded her

taste-buds. Jaina called upon her waning Force reserves to keep herself from bleeding out over the temple floor. Fortunately in the interim, the trained Vagaari shocktroops proved more than capable of finishing off their Killik-addled priests.
"Jaina?" Feesa knelt at her side.
"I'll be okay," the wounded Jedi nodded reassuringly.
"We still have a dragon and dark Jedi to beat."
"There is always more than one solution. Some more obvious than others," Jaina grimaced and accepted Feesa's help to stand. "At least that's what my uncle taught me."
"He's been in many of these types of situations then?"
"Tromping through an ancient temple looking for the button that will incinerate millions of lives, while trying to avoid giant dragons and a dark Jedi? No. But he did sneak through the Death Star and break my mom out of jail. And he got himself and mom and dad captured a lot and somehow managed to escape. He had to know what he was doing after the first few times."
Jaina took a step, grimaced, and had to stop.
"Jaina," Feesa said patiently.
"I'm fine," Jaina sucked in a breath. "I'm fine. Let's just keep moving. The more time Maez has to stew up there, the harder it will be to convince him to stand down."
"You really think that's possible?"
"Just in case, let's hope the temple computer is feeling charitable," Jaina took a halting step forward and clutched her side again. "If not, the Vagaari are going to have a whole host of bugs to deal with after the fleet is finished tearing up the planet."
"And we'll probably be dead," Feesa supplied. "And it would be very inconsiderate of us to leave all those bugs behind."
"Definitely."
"So…" Elansh looked back and forth between the human and Chiss. "We are improvising then?"
"Elansh, we're working with a Jedi. Of course we're improvising."
"Hey, I have a plan."
"Oh?"
"Step one, we don't die. Step two we make sure those next to us and behind us don't die. Step three, we somehow make those who want to kill us not want to kill us anymore. Step four, we save the planet and more or less the galaxy from a bug-pocolypse."
(-==-(IV)-==-)
The heavy stone door rose with a grating noise, motes of dust floating down as it did. A thin band of the Vagar Praxut heavens became visible

at the top of the steep ramp that led skyward. With determined purpose, Jaina, pale and sweating, led the group up the ramp and into a hangar-like room. Just outside the wide open door was a wide courtyard bathed in the bright sunlight. A brown computer console stood on the opposite side of the courtyard, almost inviting anyone to use it.

Before the courtyard, however, Maez stood in the broad hangar doorway, his years with the Killiks and the dark side twisting his appearance almost beyond recognition. His skin was ash gray and flaking, eyes almost completely black save for the red veins that course across them. He wore some kind of carapace that was as jet black and to which four additional limbs aside his own stuck out. Maez's lightsaber was held in one of his original hands, the other curled in a fist and held over his head. At the signal, Maez was soon no longer the lone figure standing in the doorway.

Soon twenty Joiner Vagaari stood side by side with him in the doorway. And another twenty behind them. And a third row of twenty Vagaari warriors behind *them.* The eyes of the sixty Joiner Vagaari were black and expressionless, their faces slack and blank.

As if to accentuate the danger of this group, behind the Joiners was a dead Krayt dragon, its carcass carved in two.

"That's one thing we don't have to worry about," Feesa muttered, seeing the dragon.

"We still have to reach that computer on the other side," Elansh gestured. "Pass, well, all of them."

"The Force will let those Joiners work in synchronization so they'll definitely be more dangerous."

"*Jaina Solo!"* The two words spoken from a hundred and twenty-one enraged mouths effectively ended the banter.

"I'm here," Jaina took a step forward, brushing away Feesa's restraining hand. "I'm here, Maez."

Maez stepped forward, his face twisted in anger and hatred. "Yes, and just as you have destroyed our family, we will destroy yours."

"It was war, Maez, people die," Jaina replied curtly. "If my brothers knew another way, do you think they would have let the Death Knights die?"

"The Solos will do whatever they want without repercussions," Maez sneered. "While the Death Knights lay cold and rotted, or their ashes strewn about, you have your families, your loves, your lives!"

"Why did the war not destroy your family?"

"Why did it not kill Anakin Solo on Myrkr? Jacen on Coruscant!"

"If they had died then, the Death Knights would still live!" The multitude of Joiners continued the conversation as if they were all one entity.
"I don't know why, okay," Jaina hissed softly. "I don't know why the Force does the things it does. But you were a Jedi once, Maez. You can still be a Jedi."
"Jedi," Maez sneered. "What do they do for us but cause us pain. We are TaatMaez now, Blood Herald for Taat. We have a new family, one that will never die. One that will continue to live on long past your own life."
"One that will fight to protect our own from glory-filled Jedi like yourself."
"One that will do all the Jedi could not do."
"One who will prevent the silver-eyed sleeper, the dark goddess Vahl, from awakening, who will save the galaxy."
"TaatMaez," Jaina said, keeping her voice level. "I understand that you are angry…"
"*You understand nothing*!" Roared the hundred and twenty-one voices.
Maez appeared to try and settle himself. "You know nothing of the loss of family, Jaina Solo. You know not the pain, the absence of a brother slain. You cannot possibly understand the sacrifice we made when your brothers killed what was ours."
"Then meld with me," Jaina said coolly, ignoring the whispered and panicked gasp of her name behind her. "Meld with me, TaatMaez. For Jedi there is no ignorance, only knowledge. Let me see the galaxy as you see it, and you can see the galaxy through my own eyes."
"TaatMaez wants only your death."
"Taat Maez wishes you to suffer as we destroy your family."
"TaatMaez does not wish to understand. For Taat knows all it needs to know."
"Really?" Jaina raised an eyebrow at Maez. "Let's say you and your nest kill me. Kill my brothers and my mom and dad. Will that truly make Maez feel better? Will it truly bring back those they lost? Make my brothers and myself any less a hero in the galaxy. If you want me and my brothers to fade. Their deeds forgotten. You would have to kill everyone in this galaxy who had heard of us. You can't make an entire galaxy believe as you do. The Yuuzhan Vong tried it and look what happened to them."
Maez learned forward, glaring. "You are trying to confuse us."
"I'm trying to save your lives," Jaina replied evenly. "A war against the Killiks will destroy your family."
"Sacrifices must be made."

"If the Killiks ally with the rest of the galaxy, we can become even stronger than just the Killiks or the galaxy alone."
"The Killiks need no allies, only Joiners. We can make the galaxy believe as we do when we have Joined them."
Communicating with a hive-mind was a lot harder than she thought it would be and she began pulling out all of the tricks she had learned from watching her mother. During her brainstorm of what to say, Jaina's mind recalled something Maez had said. "And even with your Joined army, will you be enough to oppose the Silver-Eyed Sleeper? This goddess you mentioned?"
There was a long pause, then Maez glared. "You know nothing of her."
"I know enough to know that you're afraid of her. Afraid to the point where you're willing to let the galaxy burn to protect it from her. And you didn't answer the question. Can the Killiks alone defeat her?"
Maez's mouth opened and closed several times, then suddenly his anger spiked. He thrust out a hand and a wave of Force energy sent Jaina flying backwards. "No! We have followed the Solos before and we have suffered greatly for it!"
Jaina pushed herself back to her feet, coughing out a small glob of blood as she did. With a smirk she tilted her head. "Hello Welk. I must have gotten through to Maez if you decided to step in."
"We are not TaatWelk, Prime of Taat," Maez growled.
"Really? The Maez I remember would have learned the lessons of the war. Learned what trying to go it alone would do to everyone. If you truly wanted to save lives, Killik and that of the galaxy, you would have agreed to help me."
"You lie, Jaina Solo. Did you not come to this temple to kill our family?"
"As a last resort," Jaina said. "If the Killiks stop their attack on the galaxy, I won't have to. What Welk wants is death, destruction, chaos that will make the galaxy a place where only the strong can survive. As a Jedi, I *know* that Maez would never accept that."
"Dark and light, TaatMaez and TaatWelk are the balancers Taat," one of the Joiners proclaimed.
"Sacrifice of one's life."
"Sacrifice of one's family."
"Sith and Jedi know of sacrifice and accept it."
"If you accept it, then why does Maez still hate my family for the loss of his?" Jaina countered, looking to each Joiner as she did. "If they are Jedi and Sith no longer, but a part of Taat, why do you adhere to their old beliefs? The old Welk thrives in death. The old Maez thrives in life. If they are so balanced, why does Taat choose death? Join with *us*, we *can* help one and other. Can avoid that which you most fear."

"No."
"Yes." The words were said in unison from the Joiners, each word leaving from a different mouth of the Vagaari before them.
"Well, TaatMaez, what will it be? There has already been enough suffering in the galaxy. Do the Killiks truly want to be responsible for any more?"
Maez appeared frozen in place, his entire body stalk still. Finally, he narrowed his eyes, his face a mask of hatred once more. "No, we will not Join you, Jaina Solo. We will kill you and all that you treasure. The galaxy *must* stay dark for its own good."
Jaina closed her eyes and marshaled her strength, the Force flowing around her. She could feel the temple's dark energy corrupting the Joined Jedi, destroying any chance of him agreeing to the alternative.
"Then forgive me, Maez. Just like in the war, I will do what I have to."
Maez activated his lightsaber, the Joiners readied their weapons. But Jaina was much faster. To the Joiner's point of view, it suddenly appeared as if an entire army of Jainas was about to crash into them. The brief moment of confusion to the hive-mind was more than enough time for the real Jaina's Force-enhanced speed to take advantage of Maez's addled state.
Jaina's purple lightsaber hummed several times, and silence filled the hangar. With pinpoint accuracy, Jaina had cleaved off the carapace surrounding Maez, as well as both of Maez's original arms. Before anyone could react, she had deactivated her lightsaber and pressed her forehead against the pale gray one of Maez. Her mind dove deep into the Joiner-meld. There was no hesitation on her part, no fear or reluctance. She *had* to make the Killiks understand where their actions would lead to. And as the hive-mind rallied around her own, Jaina sent an impression of Elansh at the far computer console to the young Vagaari.
Understanding the message, a nervous Elansh began to press through the ranks of the Joiners. Busy as their minds were, they didn't even give her a second glance. Elansh squeezed past the last of them and hurried to the computer console.
In the meantime, Jaina had closed her eyes and let the insect-like mind tear at her own. Her experiences, her memories, her feelings. She couldn't force the Killiks to do anything, but she could give them the opportunity to understand. She continued to give her mind to the hive-collective without fear. Her mind had been shredded before, when the not-Tahiri during the war had sliced it apart. Ever since Jacen had restored her mind, her bond with her twin had been stronger than

ever. And now she was relying on that bond to bring her head back together once more.

There is no ignorance, only knowledge.
No chaos, only harmony
No death, only the Force.

Jaina opened her eyes, her ghostly form standing out in the darkened mental realm of the Killik hive like a beacon. It was a dark and eerie place, echoes of millions of thoughts all around merging to become a singular will. There was no up or down, left or right. There was simply a state of being and an undeniable pressure to conform to the thoughts around her. The darkness pressed in from all sides, but Jaina just smiled and shook her head.

"You know all that I know, Taat. Know what I felt. How I feel. Know that if we continue to fight against each other, Taat will be destroyed. I speak not to Maez or Welk, but to all of you. Join with *me* and we can stop the threat of the Silver-Eyed Sleeper together."

The darkness coalesced in front of her, and an image of pre-Joiner Maez appeared. Unlike the golden glow that surrounded Jaina, Maez was shrouded in an oily black one and his eyes were still as dark as obsidian.

"It was a mistake to share your plans with us, Jaina," Maez said softly. "Our fleet might not arrive in time to stop the Vagaari, but Welk has taken those of Taat who disagreed with you and fled the planet to lead our fleet."

A portion of the nebulous blackness surrounding Jaina solidified into an image. Jaina's felt her mouth grow dry at the sight. Maez was showing her the Killik fleet hiding out in darkspace. A very, very large Killik fleet.

"Been busy, haven't you?"

"The Killiks have a long memory, Jaina Solo. We remember building Centerpoint, the Sinkhole Station, and many other institutions that have not survived the test of time. With Maez and Welk's intelligence, they were able to recall how to build once more. Is it not surprising we would make a fleet of thousands of vessels in the nine years since Myrkr?"

"When you put it that way, I guess not."

"You'll still lose, you know," Maez continued, staring at the image of the fleet. "The galaxy is a selfish and cruel place. The Killiks didn't cause the chaos, they only exploited what was already there. Made the dreams of those who were secretly cruel and petty a reality."

"Who is this Silver-Eyed Sleeper?"

Maez turned to Jaina. "The harbinger of the end of the galaxy, Bringer of Chaos, immortal being of darkness. The Killiks defeated her once with the aid of those of her kind, but her kind have long passed on from the galaxy, and only we Killiks remain. She will be released when the flow of time has been changed and when the Current of the Force is altered. Both events have already occurred."
"What? Current of the Force I can get. The Emperor was killed and the Jedi are back. But what about the flow of time?"
"The Killiks only know that time has been altered," Maez shook his head. "We do not know what has been changed, only that the sleeper grows stronger every year. Despite our attempts to bring the galaxy back into the darkness, the light the Jedi emit constantly bathes her slumbering eyes."
"The Killiks know of balance through Maez and Welk, don't they?" Jaina asked softly. "The more you try to extinguish the light, the stronger it becomes."
"The opposite is true as well."
"There is no light without darkness," Jaina nodded. "But if you plunge the galaxy into chaos. That'll only encourage people to fight for their way of life, what they believe in, even harder than before. Let this silver-eyed sleeper awaken, the galaxy will show her that we're not so easily beaten."
"Either way, it is out of my hands," Maez shook his head. "All the nests were in agreement, something that has happened only in the time of the Celestials. The galaxy will burn, one way or another, and there is nothing you can do to stop it. Already the Chiss and Remnant destroy each other. The Galactic Alliance crumbles and Hapes burns. Who will stand in our way, to keep us from fulfilling that which we agreed to?"
"Me," Jaina said with a sad smile. "The Jedi. Everyone who makes this galaxy their home. The Killiks want a war? They'll get it. And then there'll be no one left to fight this Sleeper when she awakens. And I say 'when', because you sound pretty damned sure that she will."
"Then burn Taat," Maez said softly, his human expression expressing a wry sadness. "Burn us all. If this is to be a war, our swarms against yours, let us be the first casualties. We retain enough of the one who was Maez, have seen your mind at a level others never will, to see the truth of your words. But just as you are helpless to stop us, we are helpless to stop the others. If you let us live today, we will either witness the fall of the galaxy at the hands of the other nests or at the hands of the Sleeper, and we do not wish to be around for that."
"What will happen to Welk and Maez?"

"TaatWelk will still command the few that fled with him. Maez will be unjoined as the Kind dies. But his mind has long been ours, so he too will die. Warn the galaxy Jaina Solo. Warn them of what is to come. Even the Killiks do not wish to be present for when it all ends."
"You'll warn them yourselves," Jaina said calmly.
"You are a sword, you are meant to kill."
"I am a sword, I'm also meant to protect. Killing all of Taat will accomplish nothing but waste valuable allies and intel. I meant it when I said to join with me. Fight side-by-side with my friends and allies. We'll win, and I'll make sure that Taat at least will still be around to see it."
The whispers all around intensified, but Jaina held the black gaze of Maez confidently.
"You may wish for Taat to live, but what of your friends and allies? We know the Vagaari, they will want our deaths as well."
"Not going to happen," Jaina shook her head.
"Then…" Maez's image shifted to become a towering Killik. "If the Sword of the Jedi has granted us mercy, we will accept. Taat will become the swords that stand beside your own. We will Join with you."
"Thank you for your trust," Jaina bowed politely.
The four-meter tall bug shifted back to Maez. This Maez, however, was shrouded in a silver light. "Jaina."
"Maez?"
"What's left of me," Maez shrugged, hands shoved into the pockets of his flightsuit. "They're right. My mind is mostly gone. I just…I just wanted to say sorry."
"No need."
"Can you tell Waxarn, Si'ada, and Nixa that I'm sorry too?"
"Can't you tell them yourself?"
"I'm not going to last until then," Maez smiled sadly. "But at least Taat has promised me they'll look out for those three if they can."
"What do you want me to tell the three, you know, about your bug-issues?"
Maez laughed softly. "Tell them I died, Jaina. Let them remember me as I once was."
"Thanks for helping me convince Taat to back us. Oh, and sorry about the chopping off of your arms. You're a great Jedi, Maez."
"Not as great as you are," Maez replied. "Now can you go and stop your Vagaari buddies from annihilating my people? You just convinced Taat of the benefits of living, and it'd be mean if you let us get vaporized anyways."

The image fell away and Jaina found herself in the temple hangar with her head still pressed against Maez's.
"Jaina?" Feesa called out, blaster raised.
"Weapons down," Jaina stepped away.
As one, the Vagaari Joiners put their weapons down. The action seemed to surprise the non-Joiners, who looked at Jaina uncertainly.
"It's over," Jaina said calmly.
"Jedi Solo!" Elansh called out. "The fleet just dropped out of hyperspace! Do I vent the heating systems?"
"No!" Jaina yelled, quickly racing to the computer and Vagaari teen. "Does this thing have communications?"
"It'll boost my comlink," Elansh held up her comlink. "But what about the…" Elansh looked back to see the Joiners all with their hands raised and kneeling. "Oh."
"More than one way to fight a battle," Jaina quipped, snatching the comlink and jamming it into one a slot that seemed built for it. "This is Jedi Knight Jaina Solo to all Vagaari warships, abort your attack runs! Abort them! The Killiks have stood down."
"{This is Grand Overseer Elansh. I am confirming that the planet is secure. All ships take up a holding pattern over the planet.}"
There were several long tense seconds, and then the voice of Elansh's counterpart, Ariarsh filled the comm-frequency. "{*This is Supreme Commander Ariarsh, I order all Vagaari vessels to obey the Grand Overseer and Jedi Solo's command*.}"
"He's still alive," Elansh grinned to Jaina.
"Of course," Jaina said. "Jagged's with him."
The seconds continued to tick by. Finally, a different Vagaari voice replied. "{*This is Fleet Commander Ingurish, Vagaari fleet standing down. You truly are powerful, Elansh, Ariarsh to have tamed the planet yourselves.}"
"{Of course,}" Elansh said evenly. She looked back to Feesa. "{But we were greatly assisted by the Chiss and Jedi who fought at our side.}"
"{*Sensors still detect a massive Killik presence.*}"
"{They are our allies now,}" Elansh explained. "{All will be revealed shortly, Fleet Commander. Let us finish things down here and then we will take a shuttle to your command ship.}"
"{*As you command. Fleet Commander Ingurish, out.*}"
Elansh exhaled slowly and looked up at the human next to her. "So… what *are* we going to do with all the Killiks?"
"We will leave the planet," one of the Vagaari Joiners approached, held at blaster point by a dozen of Elansh's commandos. "Taat has ships of

our own. We will leave and find a planet where we may grow and prepare for the end of the galaxy."
"And I thought Jedi were the melodramatic ones," Feesa sighed.
"What of the Joiners?" Jaina asked. "If I'm reading things right, Taat has nearly three billion Vagaari Joiners."
"Many have been absorbed into Taat already," the Joiner Vagaari replied. "They will come with us and fight with us. To the Vagaari, they are compromised anyways so they would not have been taken back."
"Elansh?"
"He speaks the truth," Elansh nodded slowly. "Even Ariarsh and myself wouldn't be able to stop their execution by the others. They have allowed themselves to be enslaved and are *Vaga'ari* no longer."
"Wait a minute, you said you have ships of your own?" Feesa asked. "Isn't that the Killik fleet the Vagaari were trying to beat here?"
"No," the Joiner replied. "They are ships of other nests. Taat has our own ships. We will leave the planet for the Vagaari."
"You won't help us fight the other nests?" Feesa pressed.
"We promised Jaina Solo to fight the Silver-Eyed Sleeper. We will not kill our own if there is a chance *they* can succeed."
"Fair enough, I suppose," the bewildered Chiss blinked.
"Jaina Solo, can we depart?"
Receiving another nod from Elansh, Jaina consented. "Yes, good luck out there."
"You as well, Jaina Solo. For if you survive the swarms, a danger far greater than you fathom awaits you."
"Great, at least I know my life won't be boring."
When the Joiners walked out of the hangar carrying the injured Maez, Feesa tapped Jaina on the shoulder.
"Feesa?"
"*Now* can we return to Ascendancy space and stop *that* war?"
"If there is still a war left to stop," Jaina sighed, the victory of convincing Taat to side with her washed away by the reminder that her job wasn't done. "Because if what Taat showed me is true, we're going to need every ship, Vagaari, Chiss, and Imperial, if we're going to have a hope of stopping the other nests."
(-==-(Chapter End)-==-)

Turi
(-==-(I)-==-)
"I would recommend against it," former Jedi Knight of the New Jedi Order, Turi Altamik shook her head. No longer dressed in the brown and khaki robes of a Jedi Order Jedi, her black Imperial Jedi uniform

matched the angular features of her face and her mood. The red, armored shoulder pads and gauntlets accented the paleness of her face and hands. Her blond hair, no longer tied back in a tight bun on her head, was left in a loose ponytail, her bangs framing her striking green eyes. Eyes showing every sign of someone deprived of sleep. Strangely enough, the decision to leave the Jedi Order had been easier than she thought it would be. She had sent a message to both Kyle and Jaden thanking them for their support and explaining her rationale, and that was it. Now she could focus fully on winning the war against the Chiss *her* way, without Jedi rules and regulations getting in her way. She was, after all, in the Empire and not in some territory ruled by a Jedi-worshiping government.

"And why not?" Moff Tanal, one of the leaders of the Imperial fleets in Ascendancy space, countered. "Cutting off the head of the beast is normally the best way to deal with such creatures."

Turi met her harsh stare with one of her own. "If we launch a direct strike on Csilla, it will unite all of the Ascendancy and leave our rear-guard vulnerable. Since we took Ornfra, the Chiss have avoided direct confrontation. This means that their own fleets are relatively intact."

"What would you recommend?" Admiral Tanda Pryl asked.

"We devote the forces to take Naporar and Sposia," Turi answered pointedly. "Csilla is a planet valuable to all Chiss. If intel reports are correct, Naporar is the Nuruodo family's pride and joy. Sposia belongs to Sabosen. We isolate these ruling families and send them a message. The symbolism will be hard to miss and will demoralize rather than unite the Chiss."

"What you recommend, attacking two of the most heavily fortified systems in the Ascendancy, will drag the war out for months, possibly years."

"What you suggest, Moff Tanal, is turning Csilla into a martyr. The Empire will have to deal with a Chiss rebellion for many years to come, and since they don't have a head, they will be that much harder to eliminate. We all know what happened to the last empire that tried to dismiss the threat of a meager rebellion."

Moff Drikl Lecersen, the other moff on the campaign, tilted his head in acknowledgment of Turi's logic. "And how would taking these two fortified systems help our situation?"

"We send a message to the Chiss," Turi gestured to the holograms of the indicated systems. "Naporar is a seven-planet system. Three are heavily occupied, the other four contain mines, colonies, and the like. We go Base Delta Zero on those four planets, leave them balls of dust."

"And the three that are heavily occupied?" Moff Tanal asked, eyebrows rising at Turi's suggestion.
"We give them a choice," Turi said simply. "Surrender, become part of our Empire, and they'll be treated fairly. Or meet a similar fate as the outer planets. Even the Chiss are not stupid enough to continue resisting if they are given an option to live. When the rest of the Ascendancy sees the choices available to them the battle will be half won. After we take out their military hub, we then move on and do the same to Sposia."
"If the intel reports are correct, Sposia contains no military installations. Only universities and medical facilities," Moff Tanal pressed.
"Oh?" Turi stared at the admiral. "And I thought that these Chiss were animals to the Empire. That their lives inconsequential and that they needed civilizing."
For the first time Turi could remember, Moff Tanal looked away first.
"Given the scope of your proposal, some time will be needed to position the fleets," Admiral Pryl said professionally.
"Time is what we have," Turi replied. "The Chiss aren't strong enough to beat us outright, and even if given time to regroup, will still be outmatched. I would have thought that the actions of my apprentices in the battle for this system would have been evidence enough for that."
"True," Drikl looked far from convinced but was nodding in agreement anyways. "But your plan will be a far cry from the quick victory Grand Moff Quille desired. And will deviate considerably from what we expected."
"Do you want a quick victory, or a complete victory, Moff Lecersen?" Turi shot back. She then injected the Force into her voice to connect to the gathered moffs' and officers' emotions. "We can go in, blow their headquarters to Palpatine and back, pat each other on the back and declare mission accomplished. In the meantime the poor moff who inherits this place will have to deal with a Chiss insurgency for many years to come. Or we can go in and systematically destroy everything it means to be a Chiss and rebuild the Ascendancy as a loyal hand of the Empire."
"If the plan is to change, we need approval from Grand Moff Quille."
"Go ahead," Turi shrugged. "Just ask him which solution he thinks would be best for the Empire. My apprentices and I will be awaiting your word until them."
Turi turned and left the room that had once been the Ornfra's ruling family's sitting room. Her emotions were locked away behind her

cheerful demeanor, the sizable risk she had just taken no where evident on her face.
She needed to give Jaina more time, time to do *something* with the Chiss, to report on the Killik threat, *anything*. Her way might cost more lives in the long-run, but short-term, it was what the situation called for. She needed to give the Imperial leaders a juicy target they could crow about upon its conquest, but she also needed to balance the Empire's own abilities in the process. Her head hurt just thinking about it, but she at least didn't feel the added Jedi Order-inflicted guilt for those few hundred people in the Naporar system who'd be some of the first Imperial Base Delta Zero victims in decades.
After all, what were those hundred lives compared to the few billion on Csilla?
To the hundreds of thousands of Imperials who'd die trying to hold a fractured sector?
She was doing what she had to do to preserve those lives, to keep both Imperial *and* Chiss losses at a minimum. By sending the Imperial fleets into the teeth of the finest the Chiss had to offer, it ensured both sides would play it carefully and take their time to avoid Naporar becoming a decisive battle that ends everything. Was it the 'dark side' by condemning those few hundred lives? She didn't care anymore. If the Force was so great and powerful, controlled every living thing, then what she was doing was still in line with what the Force wanted. It hadn't tried to stop her after all.
She pushed open the hatch that led to the roof, and an arctic chill washed over her. It wasn't that the Chiss were partial to inhabiting planets with extreme weather conditions. From the Chiss records in the Noris system, Ornfra's primary planet had once been a well-balanced eco-system. A few centuries earlier, the Ruling Family that had once occupied the planet ran afoul with the others and another… disagreement…took place, resulting in the ushering of a permanent ice-age across the planet. The house of Ornfra's ruling family was underground as a result.
She walked a little ways across the frozen tundra, the Force helping to keep her warm despite the bone-chilling temperature. Stopping at a slight indentation in the ground, she opened up another hatch and dropped down. The building she had entered had belonged to a Chiss family influential on the planet. Not that the family really had any choice in putting her and her two apprentices up. The eldest son had tried to protest and Moff Tanal put a blaster bolt through his head.
It was always so nice to return to her place of rest and feel an undercurrent of hate and resentment all around.

"You're back," the head of the house, an elderly Chiss a decade past the century mark, greeted neutrally. "Have the powers that be decide we should die for the good of the Empire?"
"Not yet, I'm afraid," Turi shook her head. "I did put in a good word for you, but they have a thing against creating martyrs."
The elderly Chiss's red eyes seemed to glow in the darkened tunnel. "A pity. Ornfra's been a dying world for many, many years now. I had hoped you'd be the ones to put us out of our misery."
"The Ascendancy doesn't care for you lot?" Turi grabbed a towel offered by a Chiss servant and proceeded to wipe off the melting frost on her armor.
"The Sabosen and Cspala families were direct rivals to the Ruling Family that once controlled this system. Why would they step in to help a rival family? Especially one that took both families to the brink."
"Well, you'll be happy to know that I'm trying to convince the powers that be to beat up the Chiss at Sposia."
The elder just waved a hand dismissively. "Good for you. Sabosen isn't what it once was either, so there's no pleasure in seeing them humbled."
"You're welcome," Turi said flatly.
"Why do you help the Empire?" the Chiss elder asked, his voice raspy. "I have met many Jedi in my years, and you are not like any of them."
"Decided to stop being a Jedi and just do the things that work," Turi answered glibly, accepting a warm cup of caf from another Chiss servant. "Who cares about titles anymore? Calling myself a Jedi and hoping things will work out wasn't getting anything done. I've earned more respect from the moffs than I've ever had since I put away my Jedi robes and started wearing this silly costume."
Just then her comlink beeped. Frowning, Turi held it up, feeling a sudden urgency in the Force. "This is Colonel Altamik, go ahead."
"*Colonel*," it was Moff Tanal, and she sounded alarmed. "*Report back to the command bunker immediately. There's been an incident."*
"An incident?"
"*The battle group left behind to guard our rear in the Schesa system was forced to withdraw after suffering heavy casualties. They reported symptoms similar to the negative effects you described when your Battle Meditation is employed. What does that mean?"*
Turi let out a slow, even breath, closing her eyes as she did. She then held up her comlink once more. "I would think that obvious, Evelyn. The Chiss have Jedi of their own."
(-==-(II)-==-)

The appearance of Chiss Force sensitives capable of Battle Meditation changed everything. The well-oiled war machine that was the Empire nearly backed up in fear at what this meant. They were intimately familiar with how much damage a lone Force-sensitive could inflict on their facilities and vessels. An unknown number of enemy Force sensitives backed by the devious minds that controlled the CEDF was something they hadn't counted on.

For Turi, the appearance of the Chiss Jedi was like the Force blessing her plan. The longer the Empire remained tied up in the Ascendancy, in a conflict with no end in sight, the more likely the Empire would eventually sue for peace.

With the Imperial forces at both Schesa and Noris overwhelmed by having the Battle Meditation used against them, the Empire was torn between pressing their own attack and falling back to secure the assets they *did* have. Turi had to silently applaud the Assistant Syndic who had taken command of the Chiss war-effort. By denying the Empire a decisive battle and striking where the Empire least expected it she was fast turning an assured victory into a quagmire.

That didn't mean the Empire was trying to force said decisive battle. With the revelation of a Force-sensitive Chiss on their flank, Moff Tanal had sent Turi, Antalia, and Sivan, along with a fleet-group, to retake the recaptured territories.

"Fighting another Jedi will not be like anything you've experienced before," Turi coached her apprentices. "They will have the same abilities to command the Force as you. And since I highly doubt these Chiss have any official Jedi training, they won't be constrained by the logic used by Jedi."

"Meaning?" Sivan asked.

"They'll have no qualms about killing with the Force. If you're focused on your Battle Meditation, depending on their abilities, they could easily trace you to this ship and use the Force to collapse your minds or crush your hearts. Your lessons with the Inquisitorious have taught you how to combat these personal attacks on your body, so from now until the battle, I want the two of you drilling each other, brushing up on that aspect of the Force. You have my permission to use Force Crush and the other dehibilitating methods on one and other. You've both been trained well enough to know when to stop. Just remember that the Chiss won't."

"Understood," both teens nodded.

Turi smiled grimly. "Learn fast, we'll be engaging the enemy fleet tomorrow evening."

Her apprentices saluted sharply, and left her office.

When they did, her comm-linked blinked. "This is Colonel Altamik."
"*Ma'am, you have a message being broadcast from Jedi Master Katarn."*
"Let him leave a message," Turi said coolly. "I'm still preparing my forces for tomorrow's attack."
"*Understood, ma'am."*
Turi felt a strange sense of freedom as she deliberately ignored her former master's hail. Had she still been in the Order, she might have received a lecture later. But she no longer answered to them. In fact, she didn't really answer to the Empire either. She was working off her own code of justice, of logic, and she wasn't going to let some stuffy old master stuck in his ways make her doubt otherwise.
Taking the turbolift down to the hangar bay, she swiftly crossed the vast and cold expanse to the twelve individuals dressed in Imperial-black fighter-pilot's outfits.
"Colonel," the lead Voidtrooper recruit snapped to attention.
"At ease," Turi inclined her head curtly. "You all have done well, staying alive thus far. But now it gets harder. The Chiss are literally fighting for their lives, for their culture and pride. They, quite frankly, believe in this war more than most of the people in this fleet. And *that* gives them an advantage when it comes to the Force. Tell me, Lieutenant Yage, why do you fight in this war? By the way, 'because I'm ordered to' is definitely the wrong answer."
"I fight for my family, ma'am." He gestured to his younger squad mates. "For all of Skull squadron."
"Good," Turi answered, then took away the sense of accomplishment by adding. "But not enough. Flight Officer Karin. Why, at the age of fourteen, are you suited up and ready to fly out there with the others? Do the Chiss truly need to be destroyed?"
The dark-haired male, face hidden within his flight-helmet, shrugged weakly. "I don't really know. All I have to do is watch the backs of the others."
Turi released a slow breath. "All of you have had the Force used on you back on Taspir. Know it can make you see things, make you believe things. But if you truly don't have it in your hearts to fight in this war, the Chiss *will* win. They'll shoot down each and every one of you. Every death will cause you grief, will drive your desire for revenge, and the Chiss Jedi will use that to kill more of you. This won't be like the last two engagements where we routed those detachments of Chiss vessels as if they were backwater farmers."
"Then what do we do?" Whispered one of the others, fifteen years young.

"Remember what it felt like during the Vong War? Watching as everyone died, as everyone begged and pleaded. Hungry, starving, never knowing if you'll see the sun rise the next day." Turi projected the emotions onto the squad of teens, turned their minds back towards those days, with remorseless intensity. "In this galaxy, there are those that survive, and those that die. All of us, me included, are among the survivors. We lived when billions, trillions of others died. You have to *want* to continue living as badly as the Chiss we'll be facing. *You* are the survivors in this galaxy, not them. For every one you shoot down, that's one more person you've outlived. Antalia and Sivan will be busy coordinating the fleet and warding off the Force techniques of the Chiss Jedi so whether you want to live is up to you. Fighting for a family? Watching each other's backs? Nice sentiments, but sentiments in war get you killed. You'll fight because you want to survive, because all of you are survivors. If you want to keep fighting for your family, protecting and working with them, then you need to keep on living. So *that* is why you fight in this war. You fight to live so *you* can keep the life *you* have. Because I swear, if you lot end up being a waste of my time, joining all those other fools who died for some stupid cause rather than the life you want to live, then I'll…I'll kriffin' use the Force and make your afterlife a living hell. Do you get me?"

"Yes, ma'am," the twelve teenagers stood and saluted sharply. Coupled with the Force, Turi's words had a noticeable affect not just on the twelve young teens before her, but on the various other pilots in the hangar who had been listening. Tears were dripping down her cheeks as she spoke, but her face remained tight, betraying no emotion.

"Good. Now, no more simulators today, no more training. I want all of you to enjoy the life you have. Games, sport equipment, holocalls, food and drink, they're all on me. Tomorrow, when you get into the cockpits of those Starhunters, I want you to remember this. Remember your time on Taspir, meeting everyone, living and training with them, and then show the Chiss they have a snowball's chance on Mustafar of taking that away from you. Dismissed."

Of course, Turi should have expected it, but even then, it surprised her when a vast majority of Skull squadron came up and hugged her tightly. Each whispering a quiet thank you or vow to stay alive. Turi kept chin held high and her face impassive, even as her insides became a gooey wet mess of emotions.

It was sometime later, her duties for the day done, when Turi found herself curled up in her cot in her quarters, her eyes closed. Tired as

she was, she couldn't sleep; not when she was gambling lives for lives, the aftermath of a continued war for the aftermath of a short one.
So there she was, wallowing around in her own doubts and castrations when the chime of her door pinged. Before she could answer it, the door slid open. Turi sat up, eyes wide. She distinctly remembered locking the door.
"Evening, colonel." Hair a platinum blond shade, the blue-eyed Rahm Marek entered her quarters with his black Imperial officer's cap tucked under one arm.
"Marek?" Turi blinked in disbelief. "What in blazes are you doing in my quarters?"
"The Skulls plotted against you," Rahm said, sitting down at the utilitarian desk across the room and placing a bottle of amber colored liquid on it. Despite the fact that Rahm was two years younger than her, he often carried himself with an aura of someone much older, and Turi respected that. Of course he often acted his age, and she respected that too. She knew the feeling of being forced to act older than she actually was, had to do it with the moffs every time she talked with them. "Said something about making sure you take your own advice."
"And this exactly leads to you being in my quarters, how?"
"Lieutenant Yage, I think it was, the ranking Voidtrooper kid, he gave me the code for your quarters. Sivan gave me the brandy. Supposed to be some type of fine Chiss vintage."
"Still didn't answer my question," Turi asked, more curious than anything else.
Rahm was silent for a long moment, then rose from his chair and very calmly approached her.
"Marek?"
He continued to approach until he was standing beside her cot, then he bent forward so that they were almost literally face-to-face. Before Turi could ask what he was doing, he very calmly lifted a hand and flicked her forehead with his index finger.
"What the…? Marek!"
"Just testing to see if you were as dense as you were pretending to be," Rahm answered with a shrug, returning to the desk. He swung the chair around and sat on it in reverse. "Altamik, you're a Jedi, surrounded by…well… Sivan and Antalia for one. Drae and Sa'ki could feel it the moment we boarded this vessel. And if *they* could feel it, what do you think *I* can feel? A down side to not being around Jedi on a daily basis, you become absolutely rubbish at shutting others out."

"Oh," Turi immediately looked away, trying to marshal her mental barriers. "Still, you didn't have to drag the Crossbones into this mess. Drae and Sa'ki are only thirteen."
"Do I need to get up and flick you in the forehead again, Altamik?"
"Do so at your own peril, Marek," Turi glowered.
Rahm just sighed and repeated the flicking motion with his finger from where he was. Of course, he had to use the Force at the same time, and Turi's forehead became a victim of a Force Flick.
Turi stood and glared, rubbing her forehead ruefully. "Damn it! Rahm! Do you piss off your sister like this too?"
"She has been known to call me insufferable on occasion," Rahm nodded. "But then again, she also dumped a Jedi to hook up with that current boyfriend of hers, so her judgment's questionable."
"Don't approve?"
"He's leaving charity work to become a politician. That's like a doctor deciding to become a mercenary," Rahm scoffed. "If he doesn't get devoured alive, he'll become the very thing he hates. Of course Mallie doesn't see it that way. But I'm not here to talk about her judgment."
"Just here to talk about mine?"
"Father already got a lecture from Denon about leading you astray."
"Great," Turi grumbled. She folded her arms in front of her and let out a breath. Deciding to get it over with, she just closed her eyes, shoulders slumped. "So, go ahead, let me have it."
"I think you're incredibly bold and crazy, yet skilled enough to pull off the gamble you've put into motion."
Turi, bracing herself for the usual Jedi-line about doing un-Jedi things leading to the dark side, needed a moment to digest his words.
"What?"
"Must have been a very long week and a half," Rahm deadpanned. "Normally, when complimented, you respond with 'thank you' or flatter your flatterer in turn. Look at it from my point of view, Altamik. When you have a dad who's a clone of Vader's dead elite apprentice, you tend to see things like light or dark and good or bad a bit differently than to a canned Jedi's."
"No 'you're making a big mistake and walking a road that you must turn away from'? No 'lives aren't meant to be played with and a Jedi shouldn't be doing the things you're doing?'"
Rahm shrugged. "If it will help assuage your guilt, I can say those things. Don't think I'll be able to do it convincingly though."
"So, again, *why* are you here if not to wag Master Korr's proverbial finger at me?"

"One thing my sister was never really able to understand until Jedi Knight Zekk helped her out; a Jedi always has someone to reach out to. Even if they decide not to be a Jedi anymore." Rahm rested his chin on the tops of his hands over the back of the chair. He closed his eyes briefly, and Turi felt his Force presence gently reach out to her. Out of instinct, she blocked him out, avoiding his presence as if he had some sort of Force plague. Rahm opened his eyes and smiled faintly. "The path we walk, the one father has Mals and I are on. It's not one we can walk alone and remain sane, unfortunately. Especially for Jedi, former Jedi, like you. At least father and mother raised Mals and myself Force-neutral. You were brought up with all of the Praxeum lectures and pre-conceived notions of the Force and what you're doing now conflicts with everything you were taught."
"You think you know me that well, huh?" Turi raised a thin eyebrow.
"This is actually from father," Rahm shrugged, only the faintest of blushes on his cheeks betrayed the emotion beneath his cool exterior. "He may not be part of the mainstream order, but he has more life-experience than most."
Turi just nodded, gazing absently at the bulkhead. "He's right, then. Even if I feel that what I'm doing is right, I can't help but feel this knot in my chest and stomach."
"That's not the Force, that's yourself fighting with the notion of good and evil that you had been brought up with."
"What about you?"
"What about me?" Rahm shrugged. "I was taught to do what I felt was right. I didn't have someone else's moral codes shoved down my throat, or was lectured for feeling the way I did. I think a part of the reason why father kept Mallie and myself on Corulag was so that we could grow up knowing truly what the galaxy was like. Not the sheltered, rosy picture those Praxeum teachers like to paint."
"So…what should I do?" Turi finally said helplessly.
"First," Rahm flicked one of the shot-glasses he had entered the room with in her direction. She reflexively caught it. "*We* are going to have a drink, maybe more than one. Then *we* are going to get wholly uncomfortable as we establish a Force bond. Lastly, we'll then pretend the other doesn't exist for the next few days because we'll be too embarrassed to look at each other after learning each other's deepest, darkest secrets. In the meantime, you'll be waging your war against the Chiss in as slow and inefficient a manner as you can make the Imperial war-machine. I'll be teaching Crossbones squad how to be utterly awkward when in the presence of someone of the opposite gender."

Turi had to laugh, her first genuine laugh since the war began, and she shook her head. "It's a wonder your sister hasn't beaten you to a pulp yet."
"Like I said, questionable judgment." Rahm poured the both of them a drink, which they promptly downed. The warm prickly burn at the back of their throats let them know that it was indeed a good brandy. He glanced back at the bottle with a raised eyebrow. "Should I be worried that the Skulls know how to pick their liquors?"
"Probably that Mandalorian's fault. Mirta Gev, their trainer. You're supposed to be an adult at thirteen or something in Mando culture so she probably treated them all to drinks."
"You can still back out, you know. The whole bond thing," Rahm continued, finally losing some of the cool calmness he had wrapped around him. He tried to hide his nervousness by downing another shot. "It was just a suggestion and there's no way I'll force…"
"No, it's okay. Your dad's right," Turi cut him off, her cheeks flushed. Whether it was because she felt just as embarrassed and awkward or the alcohol she did not know. She preferred to think it was the alcohol. She knew of Force bonds, of course. What Jedi didn't. But she had never been close to any of her peers, and beyond her master-apprentice relationship with Master Katarn, she didn't have any others she trusted with what went on in her head. "I guess you aren't the worse possible choice out there."
"Colonel Altamik, please, deflate my ego some more," Rahm deadpanned. "Remember you'll also see all those horrid things tumbling about in my head too."
"Of course I remember, it's why I'm hesitating," Turi bantered with a faint smile. She bit her lower lip nervously, her emerald eyes flicking up to meet the electrum blue of his. "I've never…well, I mean…oh space it. Let's just do this blasted thing so my head will be clear enough to make sure I keep my apprentices alive."
"Practical enough reason," Rahm shrugged. He got off the chair and sat kneeling on the floor.
Turi mimicked his position opposite of him, her hands folded in her lap. "Here goes nothing."
With that, the two submersed themselves into the Force and two minds became one.
(-==-(III)-==-)
It was anyone's guess how the battle would go. Both sides had Force users, but the Chiss Force users were more experienced and had lived through Palpatine's purge and the Yuuzhan Vong cleansings almost all on their lonesome. The Empire had more ships. The Chiss vessels were

more advanced. The Chiss knew the territory, the Empire knew where the inhabited planets were and would level them if the Chiss fleets didn't engage them. The Chiss were master strategists, but the Empire was no slouch either. Both sides shared doctrines, regulations, and a disciplined military ethos.

Numbers meant nothing. The Chiss rearguard had utterly annihilated an Imperial holding force thrice its size. And dozens of Chiss capital ships had already been destroyed before the Assistant Syndic took control of the fleets from her admirals. Then again, the Empire could afford such losses, the Chiss could not. Not that the Empire wanted to play a game of war-of-attrition. Not when they were supposed to be the superior ones teaching the Chiss a lesson.

"The Chiss are there, right where intel said they would be," Moff Evelyn Tanal said determinedly, jabbing a finger at the sensor readout. She had joined the hunt for the Chiss harassing their rearguard the moment the situation looked winnable. "They backed themselves into a corner. The hyperspace lanes all around this systems are wholly unreliable. The only way out is through our fleet."

Weeks of hunting down the rearguard force, forcing the Chiss fleet into a neatly prepared box, appeared to have finally borne fruit.

"Well," Turi quipped, fighting back a niggling doubt in the back of her head. "You got your battle. Are you going to avenge the deaths of the holding fleet?"

"You bet the Emperor's skinny arse I will," Evelyn said curtly. "Comm-operator. Deploy fighter squadrons and bring the rest of the fleet in. We'll make an example out of these upstarts. Even their Chiss Jedi won't be able to help them now."

"Just one problem, Moff Tanal," Turi countered as the Imperial war-machine hummed into action.

"What?"

With only several light-hours between the two fleets, Turi just shook her head and sighed. She could already feel in the Force that the battle was lost. Amazingly without a single shot fired. "The Chiss read you perfectly. They knew what the Imperial response would be and led us out here."

"But what for?"

Suddenly alarm systems began ringing out from all over the crew-pit.

"Moff Tanal! Some sort of singularity bomb was detonated in the hyperspace lane behind us. The hyperspace lane just collapsed."

"That," Turi deadpanned.

"What!?" Evelyn looked at the science officer. "When did the Chiss get such a weapon?"

"Unknown, ma'am," the officer quickly looked through the sensor readings. "But the gravimetric forces are akin to a Vong dovin basal being deployed. Maybe the Chiss engineers backwards engineered one of them."
"'Maybe'?" Evelyn snarled. "Why don't you get together with your team and find out!"
"Yes, ma'am."
"In the meantime, have the fleet form up and prepare to attack. If we can't leave, neither can the Chi…"
"Ma'am, look! The enemy fleet!" The sensor operator called out in bewilderment.
As if it had been a mirage, the shining fleet of Chiss Star Destroyers and wings of enemy fighters vanished from their minds' eye. In its place was a single, box-like vessel, looking as if it was made of children's building blocks. It was barely larger than a sky-hopper, and appeared to have no weapons or even shields. Around it were hundreds of drones, the mounted holoprojectors flickering off one at a time. The only Chiss fleet in the system.
"Receiving incoming transmission."
"Put it through," Turi said with a wry grin as Moff Tanal's mouth opened and closed in disbelief. Maybe the Chiss were more skilled than she gave them credit for.
"It's on an open channel, ma'am. The whole fleet can hear it."
"*This is Jedi Master Antaria Wellos to the foolishly short-sighted Imperial leaders. The Chiss Ascendancy thanks you for the donation of your vessels and hopes you make more deposits in a timely manner. By now you will have noted that the hyperspace lane you came in on, the only stable route out of this system, is no more. In fact, unless you are in a fightercraft, none of the surrounding hyperspace lanes are stable enough to maintain your journey. So it is with the deepest regret that I must inform you that if you wish to leave this system alive, you will have to do so in vessels fightercraft-size or smaller. You can try to leave in your capital ships, of course. If you do, I've already warned you of the consequences and will have no responsibility for the thousands that will die in such an attempt. Of course, the ability to use the Force will also greatly increase the odds of surviving these unstable hyperspace lanes. Even in a fighter, there is no guarantee the lanes will hold up for the entire duration of the trip. I wish all of you the best and hope that the Force is with you in your trip back to your homes.*"
"Definitely old-school Jedi," Turi sighed, mostly to hide her admiration. "Only a Republic, Chiss Jedi can make gloating and sympathies sound

the same. Heck, only a Jedi from the old days can take out an entire fleet without killing a single person."
"Send word to the nearest Imperial fleet." Moff Tanal whirled back around, panic barely hidden by her professional demeanor.
"Something's jamming the comm-lines ma'am," the comm-officer shook his head. "We can't even get word to the ship right next to us."
"Then, helmsman! Plot a course for the next hyperspace…"
"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Turi said lightly, still trying hard not to laugh. Laughing deliriously on the bridge of a Star Destroyer, after all, was a sign of madness. "Jedi of her era are taught not to bluff when it comes to all those lives. She meant it when she said we'd go 'poof' if we tried to jump out of here."
"Then what do we do?" The moff said in a low voice, jaw clenched. "We have fifty capital ships out there. That's well over a million souls. At most we have a couple hundred fighters."
"You could let us Imperial Jedi go and get help," Turi said innocently. "I'm sure Admiral Pyor will be able to come up with something."
"And in the meantime?"
"Sit and wait. Hope there's still a few good vids left in the commissary. You have to appreciate the Chiss, Moff Tanal. A single Jedi effectively neutralized a third of your invasion fleet without a single loss of life."
"I am aware of that, Colonel," the moff hissed back.
"Oh good, I hoped you were," Turi said frostily. "Now what will it be? Let my Imperial Jedi go and get help, or have all of us stranded here? Maybe we can build a campfire and sing a couple of songs. As commander of this fleet, you can hardly leave your subordinates in such a time of need."
Evelyn's fists clenched as she glowered at the younger woman. But after a second, the moff looked away. "Go."
"Thank you. I'm sure we'll get you out of this mess in no time, Moff Tanal."
"Ma'am! Several of the Starhunter squadrons have just leaped to hyperspace!" The comm-officer called up.
"Ravager squad, the new advanced Defenders, also just jumped." Another announced.
Turi felt the Force-induced panic send several more squadrons into flight, before the box-shaped vessel made its own jump into hyperspace and out of the clutches of the massive Imperial fleet. Moff Tanal, in the meantime, continued to flounder, looking left and right at her bridge crew with a bewildered expression on her face.
"We'll let you sort things out here," Turi patted the moff sympathetically on the shoulder.

Once turned away from the moff, Turi couldn't help but smirk at the emotions and thoughts swirling around in Tanal's head. There was no way the Council of Moffs was going to let her keep her position after getting a third of the invasion fleet, some of the Empire's most advanced ships, marooned in a backwater system. Moff Tanal had been the one slated to inherit the Chiss territories once the war was over, effectively quadrupling her holdings and resources. Of course, she only would have been able to do that if she had won the war. It was supposed to have been an easy win, and as a flunky of Grand Moff Quille, she would have been able to enhance his reputation greatly.
The problem now was that the other Moff on the campaign, an old supporter of Pellaeon, Moff Drikl Lecersen, was next in line. The last thing Quille would want is to give any more power or status to the on-his-way-out Pellaeon and deposed Moff Saretti. Yet he couldn't give it to the moff that had just stranded the fleet either.
In a way, it worked out perfectly for Turi, who could feel the slight tremors in the Force that let her know Jaina was on her way back to civilized space.
Now all Turi had to do was keep the war as drawn out and deadlocked as possible. It wouldn't do her any good if the Chiss actually managed to send the Imperials home with their tails between their legs. Something she wouldn't have thought possible if she *hadn't* met that Assistant Syndic or that reckless Jedi in the box-ship.
She met up with Rahm and his squad of Imperial Jedi and Voidtrooper recruits, information relayed through the newly established Force-bond they shared.
"I give us about ten minutes before the Moff tries to make us the scapegoats," Rahm said with forced cheer. "That's probably how long it will take for her to regain control of things."
"Ten minutes, you're generous," Turi quipped back, nodding as Antalia and Sivan led their unit down another hallway to join them. The newly established Force-bond wasn't as embarrassing as either of the participants thought it would be. "I say five. Despite this fiasco, Tanal *is* good at what she does. Unlike say Moff Rezer or some of her other colleagues."
The two teams made it to the hangar bay, the fighters of Skull and Crossbones squadrons still prepped and ready. No sooner had they arrived, than a security team hustled forward and held up their hands. "Hold here, Colonel Altamik. Orders from Moff Tanal. Your teams are to remain onboard to be debriefed."
"Debriefed?"

"Yes, colonel. Moff Tanal wants to find out just how you could have let us be led into such an obvious trap when your Jedi senses are supposed to avoid such things. Please come with us."
"Emperor's black bones, I don't have time for this," Turi grumbled.
Rahm held up a calming hand. "Relax, colonel. Drae, you want to try that thing you do?"
A thirteen year old boy, face hidden by an Imperial flight helmet, stepped forward. With a silent wave of his hand the security team's eyes glossed over and they appeared frozen in place. The boy then held up five fingers to the others.
"We have five extra minutes," Rahm said glibly. "Let's get into our fighters and get out of here."
"What was that?" Turi murmured as Rahm ran alongside her to the *Altamik Flier.*
"Force stasis."
"That's advanced."
"What can I say, I'm a good teacher."
"Marek."
"Drae's parents were Reborn, both killed when the Vong attacked the Empire. But from a young age they were teaching him about the Force. He probably knows more obscure techniques than I do, but his control is the unreliable thing. That's the tenth time he's used stasis, and it's lasted anywhere from a couple of seconds to a full hour. He'll be a powerful Jedi if he lasts that long."
The hatch to the *Flier* closed behind them.
"Father, start of the launch cycle, skip the checklists," Turi announced to her ship's droid mind. "Have the non-Force users slave their navi-comps to ours."
"*Affirmative."*
Both Jedi slid into their seats. Turi quickly buckled in and glanced over the computer readout. "Good, Tanal wanted to keep things quiet. Only used her personal security team. We're good to go."
"Skulls and Bones," Rahm pulled on a headset. "Launch when ready and get clear of the *Bloodfin* as fast as you can."
The two dozen and a third fighters rocketed out of the hangar bay. The new TIE Starhunter models, the most advanced fighter the Empire had to offer, quickly piled on the distance between the fighters and their carrier.
"We have three other Starhunter squadrons forming up to pursue," Rahm warned. "They are acquiring missile locks."

"Give me the comm." Turi quickly left the piloting to Rahm and punched the communications. Static filled the lines. "Father, switch to the hyperwave communicator."
"*Done."*
"Imperial Starhunters. This is Colonel Altamik of the Imperial Jedi Knights. The ones responsible for the past few Imperial victories against the Chiss. I really do hope you're not stupid enough to obey a command of a condemned woman. She may try to lay the blame on us, but it is she who led us here. Throw away your lives for her if you really want to, but think about this. One Jedi stranded millions of people here. What type of damage do you thing six can do? Let us report to Moff Lecersen and we might just save this war. Or engage us, die for a mad-woman, and we'll report to Moff Lecersen anyways."
A few seconds ticked by.
Finally, Rahm whistled approvingly. "You have a way with words, Altamik. The fighters are peeling off."
Turi exhaled, leaning back into her chair. "Jump to hyperspace when ready. After this, Marek, I really need to use my accumulated leave time."
(-==-(IV)-==-)
"How goes the campaign against Naporar?" Turi asked Moff Lecersen, saluting the elder statesman out of pure reflex. The moff had greeted them personally in the hangar bay of his own *Turbulent*-class Star Destroyer, the *Conspirator.* He had been more than happy to hear about the fate of his fellow moff, despite the strategic ramifications the loss of a third of the invasion fleet entailed.
"Good," the graying-hair of the moff was the only sign of his age. "We managed to sneak a fleet group around their lines and hit Sposia at the same time. Your plan to attack the homeworlds of the ruling families was sound, and the Chiss movements are muddled and clumsy. It's taken us the better part of two weeks, though. The Chiss still hold the inner planets in this system. It's only a matter of time before they fall."
"And our next step?"
"The loss of Moff Tanal's fleet changes things. Now that our ability to hold the territory we have conquered is at risk, my advisors and I have concluded that the Chiss must be taught a lesson. We have no interest in these balls of space rock. For every system that resists we will be conducting Base Delta Zero operations on all planets that fall to our forces. The more the Chiss resist, the more planets we will leave barren wastelands."
"You intend to wipe the Chiss out as a species," Turi kept her tone neutral despite her surprise. *Good going, Altamik, suggest something*

*that can be turned into a genocidal tactic, because I'm **sure** they won't take **that** route.*
"They serve no beneficial role to the greater galaxy," Moff Lecersen's boots clicked loudly on the metal deck plating. "It is time they either became useful to us or made to serve a purpose."
"They *have* been keeping threats like the Killiks and the Vagaari at bay."
"And the Imperial garrison we will leave behind will be more than up for the job. If the Chiss could defend the galaxy with the paltry few vessels they have at their disposal, we can do the same."
"True," Turi conceded. "So I assume the first lesson of our might will be employed on Naporar itself?"
"You would be correct. Razing the outer planetary bodies, while impressive, will compare little to the destruction of a heavily populated world like Naporar. At present, our intelligence reports that the command and control center of the CEDF has a population of roughly three-quarters of a billion Chiss. A majority of them connected to the ruling family of Nuruodo. We take off one of the heads of the Ascendancy, the most venomous one, and the others will see the wisdom in accepting Imperial control."
"Bold plan, Moff Lecersen," was all Turi could answer. Most of the goodwill she had built up had been with Moff Tanal. Moff Tanal had been Grand Moff Quille's 'golden' moff, the Imperial leader's favorite and one in charge of the war. The Chiss victory over Tanal was not one Turi had expected, and though fortunate in many ways, hurt Turi's own plans in others. Her influence with Moff Tanal now meant little, since it did nothing to stop *this* moff from carrying out his plan. Especially since his plan was basically her own, but on a more extreme scale.
Memo to self, Altamik, the old guard of the Empire is still crazy with delusions of grandeur.
"The only thing that stands in our way now is the Assistant Syndic, who has rallied a sizable fleet and is blocking us from any further penetration of this system."
"The Chiss made their stand here during the Vong War," Turi iterated. "This system is symbolic in more ways than one."
"And it will soon gain new meaning when we seize it. I have no doubt your Jedi will be more than instrumental in routing these blue mongrels from this system. The moment they have eaten and rested, I will deploy them and bring a swift end to this Assistant Syndic's brash, yet foolish counter-attack."
"Confident," Turi remarked lightly. They were now in the turbolift heading for the bridge.

"The Chiss relied on their hit-and-run tactics to stymie Moff Tanal and the rear-guard. But given that any running now will sacrifice their 'symbolic' world, they are trapped," the moff replied. "If they run, they lose their military headquarters. The Sposia system will soon follow, leading to a collapse of their justice system. I am having the Third Fleet target the homeworlds of Inrokini and the Chaf families at the same time. The Chiss will soon know the power of the Empire, know the true meaning of despair."
"What's to stop them from flanking us?" Turi asked, deliberately grouping the Imperial Jedi with Moff Lecersen's fleet. "We still need supply-lines, a fall-back point in case we run into any difficulties. If we force a rabid animal into a corner, they become so much more dangerous."
"And if they charge, they will be put down." The doors to the turbolift opened and they stepped out onto the bridge. "Report!"
A captain, blond-haired and grey-eyed, uniform neatly pressed and adorned with his rank insignia, hurried forward and saluted. "Moff Lecersen, the Chiss fleet remains in formation around the third planet from the sun. Stealth probes detect orbital defense cannons and ground-based anti-capital ship weaponry installed on the moons. The fleet has yet to change in size, so it is reasonable to assume that any reinforcements they have are either being held in reserve or have been expended. We've also spotted many civilian transports fleeing the third planet from the sun. It is highly likely they are trying to evacuate this system knowing it is lost."
"We still retain four-to-one numerical superiority?"
"Yes, sir."
"Good man. The Imperial Jedi will soon be ready to augment our forces. Have the fleet begin preparations for a full-scale engagement. Battle plan Pellaeon Gamma."
"Yes, sir."
Drikl Lecersen turned back to Turi. "Your people have two hours to ready themselves, I assume that will be enough?"
Turi, glancing at the sensor readout of the Chiss fleet, tilted her head briefly. "That will be enough."
Knowing what was about to happen when those two hours were up, the time seemed to come all too fast.
Turi had stayed on the bridge for those hours, studying the intelligence reports and fleet movements. There was no way the Assistant Syndic was going to sacrifice her battle capabilities to defend a symbol. Then again, in the past, people had died for symbols much smaller and more meaningless to anyone else but them.

When the time came, the turbolift doors swooshed open and Antalia and Sivan Draco both strode in in full Imperial Jedi regalia. Red stormtrooper pauldrons, brown capes, heavy black boots, and sleek black Imperial outfits made them stand out against the masses of plain officers around them. They may have been young, but they had both quickly picked up the fact that image was everything in this particular navy.

"Colonel, Moff Lecersen," both teens snapped to attention. "Flight Officers Antalia Draco and Sivan Draco reporting for duty."

Moff Lecersen gestured to Turi. "They're all yours Colonel Altamik. Get this victory for the Empire and I'll ensure your Imperial Jedi are well rewarded for their efforts."

Not said was the fact that such a victory would increase Lecersen's political capital immensely.

"For the Empire," Turi regurgitated with a cool smile. "Both of you, you know what to do."

Antalia and Sivan saluted once more and then headed across the walkway over the bridge pit and to the front of the bridge. In eerie synchronization, they both sat down cross-legged and closed their eyes.

Turi could sense their bond with the two Imperial Jedi from the second unit; Drae and Sa'ki if she remembered the names of the younger Jedi successfully. In turn, she could also feel Rahm's support through their new bond, and it took her a minute to get used to the idea that she wasn't alone on this mission. She sent her thanks, then refocused on the matter at hand.

"Moff Lecersen, you may begin deploying your vessels now. The Battle Meditation has been established."

"You have your orders," the moff nodded to the rest of the bridge crew. He then walked over to a holoprojector displaying the fleets and proceeded to watch his fleet move into battle position.

"Chiss fleet is deploying their fighters as well," a voice called out from the bridge pit. "Formation suggests that it's not the Assistant Syndic in charge. Unless of course she's trying something new."

"All fighter squadrons have cleared the hangar."

"We'll be in effective firing range in ten minutes."

"The *Retribution* is reporting power fluctuations in its main reactor. The captain is requesting it fall back until the matter is resolved."

Moff Lecersen nodded once, and the comm-operator relayed the message. One of the downsides to rushing the *Turbulent*-class Star Destroyer into mass production five years ahead of schedule was that the vessels had many design issues that billions of credits still hadn't

managed to make go away. Even Lecersen's own flagship, the *Conspirator* was plagued with a power-drain problem that limited its mobility in combat. Most of the time the powerful turbolasers and sheer numbers compensated for these errors, but it wouldn't do them any good if their reactor went critical at an inopportune time.
As it was, both fleets were rapidly approaching the point of no return. To a distant observer, one would think that they were watching an ancient ground battle in the making. The battlelines on both sides unfolded like a handheld fan, the fighters of both fleets surging out ahead of the capital ships. Following the fighters were the light frigates, gunships, destroyers, and missile ships in staggered rows. Both sides used Imperial doctrines and military strategies; only the true Imperial side was many times larger.
"Hold the fighters," Antalia murmured. A message Turi relayed.
"Minefield ahead, cloaked," Sivan added a second later.
"Have them clear it," Lecersen directed.
Green and yellow flashes of light burst out from the Imperial fighter screen, followed shortly by the detonation of hundreds of cloaked mines.
"Press the attack, give no quarter," Lecersen grinned, the wrinkled skin of his hand tightening as he made a fist.
"Chiss gravity well projectors have been activated," a report announced.
"Keep the Imperial Jedi fighters back in reserve in case they try to jump in behind us. The regular pilots can handle those Clawcraft."
Despite the moff's words, the Chiss pilots they were up against were evidently the best of the best. Even in their new TIE Starhunters, the Imperial pilots were being shredded with every juke, roll, and dive. And it went without saying that those pilots not as fortunate to get assigned a well-shielded and armored, hyperspace capable Imperial fighter had an even worse time.
The light frigates, gunships and other support vessels seemed to have their hands full with their Chiss counterparts as well. Blue maser fire poured out in relentless torrents from the Chiss side, turning shields opaque from the impact, before overloading and collapsing them completely. Warheads streaked through the void as Imperial and Chiss forces did their best to completely annihilate the other.
"A Chiss Jedi is supporting the Chiss side," Turi said after a moment.
"What does that mean?" Lecersen asked tersely.
"Nothing much," Turi smirked, a hand on her chin. "The battle's just gotten more interesting. Their Jedi cancels out our own. All that's left is

the will of our people. Do we want to destroy the Chiss as badly as the Chiss want to stay alive? Whoever wants this victory more will get it."
Outside the *Conspirator*, the lumbering capital ships of the Imperial fleet began entering firing range. Barrages of thick green lasers and electronic-frying ion blasts lit up the void.
The Chiss Star Destroyers remained where they were in front of Naporar, launching an occasional missile into the fray both otherwise denying the Imperial fleet a drawn out fight. With the arrival of the Imperial capital ships, the Chiss fighters and light support vessels began a fighting retreat, leaving far more enemy fighters in their wake than their own.
"Chiss fleet dropping out of hyperspace off our starboard side!" The announcement was greeted by the hollow echoing sound of multiple warheads exploding against the *Conspirator*'s shields, the hull being pitted with shrapnel.
Moff Lecersen nodded. "They've used this tactic before, refocus..."
"Sir, the ships aren't slowing down! In fact, I'm not even sure they're ships. Sensors aren't recognizing their configurations."
Something a fifth the size of a *Turbulent*-class Star Destroyer suddenly rammed into an adjacent *Turbulent*-class Star Destroyer in full view of the crew of the *Conspirator*. The resulting explosion ripped the Star Destroyer in two, leaving it very dead in space.
"What was that!" Lecersen snapped.
"Defunct cargo vessel, sir! Sensors only just identified it. The Chiss must have strapped heavy ordinance onto it."
"A desperation maneuver then." Lecersen regained his confidence even as an older *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer lost its conning tower to another flying wreck. "Press the attack."
The Imperial fleet continued to close the distance, picking off any brave Chiss vessel that tried to buy time for their compatriots. The Chiss surprise attack was quickly negated as the Star Destroyers blasted most of the newly arrived junk vessels on the spot.
And then the planetary and lunar garrisons of Naporar joined the battle. Oversized maser cannons, installed on the planet and moon after the Yuuzhan Vong invasion, opened fire with extreme prejudice. More fighters poured out from the lunar bases and from the planet, essentially doubling what the Chiss had brought to the field before.
"All batteries, open fire!" Moff Lecersen barked.
The Imperial fleet's reply to the Chiss defiance was a withering bombardment of destructive energy. The sixty plus capital ships pounded the smaller sized Chiss fleet with overwhelming firepower.

Even then the Chiss continued to fight, the minutes slowly turning into hours. The planetary and lunar cannons downed one Imperial cruiser after another, blasting apart conning towers or blowing holes in the mighty warmachines. Chiss fighters began to even the numbers against their Imperial counterparts, even as they took losses in turn. And all around, the void of space lit up like some type of holiday light show; the gun decks of the capital ships booming with repeated concussions.

One by one, as the Imperial grew closer, the planetary and lunar cannons began to fall silent. Imperial fighters and bombers howled their way into low orbit and demolished the gun emplacements.

One by one, the Chiss capital ship fleet began to feel the effects of the Imperial numerical superiority. The gleaming white Star Destroyers of the Ascendancy were gradually reduced to charred and flaming wrecks. Some were even caught by Naporar's gravity and pulled down into the planet.

There would be no last minute rescue.

No heroic arrival of fleets held in reserve.

The Chiss asked for no mercy.

The Imperials didn't yield their assault.

When the last orbital cannon went up in flames, the surviving Chiss vessels scrambled to get clear of Naporar's gravity field and jump to hyperspace. By then, night had fallen on the side of the planet facing the battle. Night had fallen, but the surface of the planet was aglow in red and orange from the multiple bombing runs and debris falling back into the planet.

"Last of the Chiss resistance has been cleared," the *Conspirator*'s captain announced triumphantly many hours later.

"Receiving a message from the planet," the comm-operator said.

"That will be the Chiss trying to surrender," Moff Lecersen smirked. "Let's hear it."

"*Imperial commander, this is Aristocra Sev'eree'nuruodo. Call off your assault. You have won."*

The disgruntled voice of one of the Chiss leaders had Moff Lecersen grin predatorily. "I am Moff Drikl Lecersen, leader of the Imperial Second Fleet. Aristocra, I do not recall the Ascendancy having any power over the Imperial Navy. As such, whether I call off my assault is not up to you. Your little resistance put up quite the fuss when they could have simply surrendered from the start. It is very clear that the Ascendancy does not have the power to stop the Empire, and you have wasted many lives trying to accomplish the impossible. I believe the

appropriate sentence for an obsolete politician like yourself is a quick death."
"*Don't be foolish, Moff Lecersen. Both sides can..."*
The moff made the standard 'kill transmission' gesture, and the comm-officer complied. "Begin positioning the fleet all around that planet." He stabbed a finger towards the world before them. "Commence Base Delta Zero when ready."
Turi swallowed heavily. "Are you sure that is the best course of action, Moff Lecersen?"
Almost sarcastically, Lecersen looked over his shoulder at her. "And what sage advice would you have for me this time?"
"I agreed with your plan earlier, but that was before we learned that an Aristocra was down there. You turn that planet into ash, you'll turn her into a martyr."
"A martyr only matters if the cause she fights for can be won," Lecersen shook his head. "These Chiss can't win."
"Only a thought," Turi folded her arms in front of her and turned back to look at the world. She silently knew that this would be the last time anyone would see it in its current state for many, many years.
It would take several more hours to position the fleet. She had that much time to come up with something that wouldn't jeopardize her standing with Lecersen, or erode her already bent morals. Was it wrong to allow a Base Delta Zero, complete annihilation of a planet's surface, on sparely inhabited worlds, but balk at the razing of a world like Naporar? Treat so carelessly the lives of hundreds or thousands and then value the millions? There were nearly a billion souls on that planet, lives now in her hands. Maybe she could convince the moff to first send a team to apprehend the Aristocra. And then what? Let the moff burn the rest of the world?
She felt a presence in the back of her mind and promptly retreated towards it.
Marek, got anything?
Mind trick.
He'll be extremely grumpy when he comes out of it.
Remind him of who he's fighting for.
Himself.
Exactly. Stop playing by the Jedi rule book Altamik.
Turi detected what Rahm had in mind and allowed a smile to grace her face.
That's brilliant. I could kiss you.
It's only brilliant if it works. I wouldn't be able to pull it off.
Which is why you're down there in the hangar and I'm in the bridge.

He still might raze the planet regardless.
If he does, at least I'll have tried.
Good luck.
Thanks.
"Moff Lecersen, a word?" Turi gestured to the side office.
The moff, basking in his victory, scowled slightly, but nodded and followed the younger woman. Even though the woman could have easily been his granddaughter age-wise, Grand Moff Quille had been quite explicit in the latitude she was to be given. Moff Lecersen wasn't so blind as to be unable to see that much of the Imperial success had been from her advice, not that he'd ever admit it out loud. He was a moff from another era, a time of Palpatine and the glory days of the High Empire. He had even held meetings with some of Palpatine's Force-sensitive hunters at one point in time. He had survived the downfall, the warlords, the Yuuzhan Vong War, and through it all, he firmly believed it was the Empire's right to bring order and civilization to the galaxy.
The doors closed behind him.
"What is it?"
"A friendly reminder," Turi answered his clipped tones with her own. "Who is in charge of the Empire right now and who isn't?"
"Grand Moff…"
"Exactly," Turi cut the older man off. "Not Gilad Pellaeon, not Saretti. Tell me, why would Quille have you out here?"
"I serve the Emp…"
"Can it," Turi interrupted once more. "Quille has you out here because it means you aren't creating waves back on Taspir. He made you commander of the Second Fleet to appease your ego. He made Evelyn Tanal the overall commander of this campaign because she had what it took to get the job done. There is little you can do to earn Quille's trust. Because, quite frankly, he *doesn't* trust you. That's why he has Admiral Pryl on Third Fleet, why all the captains on your ships were appointed by him. You raze this planet, start crowing about how it's good the Chiss learn their place, Quille won't reward you by making you moff of this sector. He'll bring you up on war-crimes to show the galaxy that the Empire still remains civilized. He'll use your grab for power as an excuse to get rid of you. He'll then use your hard work and give the appointment to one of the others. You can't win 'fighting for the Empire,' Moff Lecersen. Like all the other moffs this day and age, you have to fight for yourself. Fight to do just enough to maintain your power and not draw Quille's attention."

Once again the Force made her words the only reality Lecersen could see. Made it sound as if the words she spoke were the absolute truth, that there were no outs or alternatives.
"The Chiss."
"Will fall," Turi said tersely, continuing to shroud her every word with the Force. She no longer cared about the ethical aspect of what she was doing, and made each wave of mental Force energy deliberate and potent."But it's how they fall that matters. Appearances are everything, right? You can either achieve an outright victory, a massacre, and draw Quille's concern. Or win by doing just enough to be above reproach, but not enough to earn praise either. The Empire you wish can still exist under Quille, but it'll be up to you as to whether you'll be around to see it."
"Then," Lecersen paused, sharp eyes darting to Turi. "What is it you recommend, colonel?"
"Base Delta Zero the planet, but after you've evacuated everyone on it. We'll then have nearly a billion prisoners of war. A handy bargaining chip if you toss in the Aristocra and whatever cabinet of advisors she has with her."
"And we would store them, where?"
"On our ships at first. Let them watch the fate of their planet, then send them back down," Turi gestured to the Star Destroyers outside the viewport. "We control the nearby systems so we'll have more than an advance warning if the Chiss try to rescue their people. This way you can be seen as both brutal, yet merciful. Someone who can utterly destroy a people, yet leave enough for them to recover in decade's time. In other words, you'll be a run-of-the-mill Imperial commander. Too soft to outright slaughter them, yet hard enough to get your message across."
"And you are certain Quille will approve of this?"
"Put it this way, Moff Lecersen. We do things as you had intended, you definitely would have been deposed of. At least this way you show you can do the job without showing up Moff Tanal."
Several long seconds passed, during which the moff gazed out of the viewport at the fleet and planet. In those seconds, Moff Lecersen could have hardly known that Turi was subtly nudging his thoughts towards one direction. Striping away doubt, removing guilt and personal pride. It was a Force lobotomy at the finest, and something the Jedi Council would most definitely denounce. But Turi knew that it was the best option for the moment and situation. She couldn't mind-control an entire fleet, but she could compromise the one in charge of it all. It helped that much of what she had told the moff had already crossed

his mind at one point or another. It was so much easier using the man's own doubts against him than manufacturing new ones. Even then, Moff Lecersen refused to be rushed on the issue.
Finally, Lecersen released a breath, nodding like the decision had been his all along. "I agree, colonel. Thank you for preventing me from making such a detrimental error."
"I serve the Empire, Moff Lecersen," Turi answered with a mirthless smile. "Maybe you should go back out to the bridge. You know, just in case one of Quille's captains gets an itchy trigger finger and decides to raze his part of the planet before we've evacuated it."
Lecersen inclined his head once, and then left the room.
Thanks Marek, Turi sent, her heart pounding loudly as *their* gamble paid off.
Any time, Altamik.
Turi smiled and let herself plop down in to the comfy officer's chair, relief temporarily sapping her strength. After a moment to compose herself, she stood up, mentally summoning her apprentices. It was one thing to set a plan in motion, it was an entirely other thing all together to make sure it continued rolling on the path she wanted it to. There were still too many variables.
In other words, she wasn't done quite yet.
(-==-(V)-==-)
Two months, two systems. By the end of the third month of the Chiss-Imperial War, the home systems of three of the five Ruling Families had fallen.
And fallen hard.
Admiral Tanda Pryl was under no restrictions when it came to her sector of the war and had utterly razed the homeworld of the Inrokini family. True to Turi's plan, both Naporar and Sposia had met similar fates, but only after the populations had been temporarily evacuated. Nevertheless, many tens of thousands of Chiss had died defending these systems. The Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet had been decimated.
And tens of thousands of Imperials had died taking the systems as well. It had been a long and brutal fight to get to where they were; the Chiss still refusing to yield and bloodying the Imperial fleet with every lightyear advanced. So great and unexpected were the losses in ships, supplies, and manpower that both Lecersen's Second Fleet and Admiral Pryl's Third Fleet were regrouping to form one large fleet. The Empire had thrown close to two-hundred capital ships at the Chiss in hopes of an overwhelming victory. Sixty of those ships were still trapped in the backwater system that Moff Tanal had led them to.

Fifteen had been in the rear-guard and had been destroyed by the Chiss counter-attack. Then another twenty-five had been lost in the fights to take the Ruling Families' home systems. The fight for the Chaf home system had been called off due to the danger of the Imperial fleet being flanked.

Even the Imperial Jedi were not immune from the drudgery that was the war. Three young pilots from Skull squadron had died in the fighting, much to Antalia and Draco's great distress. The only consolation was that the three deaths had all been ones worthy of repeating when discussing the brave deeds of those who fell. A fifteen year old pilot had sent his fatally damaged fighter into the engines of a Chiss Star Destroyer, activating his hyperdrive at the last second and blowing a hole through the much larger vessel. Another had died protecting the younger pilots of her squadron. A third led a suicide charge to break up a Chiss Clawcraft counter-attack, taking out two of the Chiss fighters before a missile blew his fighter apart.

The war had stretched on, long and hard.

And now the war was approaching the Chiss homeplanet of Csilla.

The Imperial invasion force was massing in the Jameron system, home to one of Csilla's neighboring agricultural industries. The outcome of the battle was already clear, but the fight to get there wasn't so much. If the Chiss could inflict so much damage on the Imperial warmachine with only a fraction of the ships, it didn't matter how many Chiss vessels were defending Csilla. A third of the remaining Imperial fleet was already on guard duty for the captured territories. Another group was helping the supply convoys through enemy territory. This left only several dozen Imperial Star Destroyers available to take on whatever the Chiss had left.

The odds weren't looking good. Sure the Empire might finally humble the Chiss, but they'd shoot themselves in the foot doing so. And the admirals and moffs, and the captains and generals all knew it. But, orders were orders. Grand Moff Quille wanted Csilla, expected Moff Lecersen and Tanal to get the job done, and no one wanted to cross the Grand Moff. Everyone wanted that triumphant 'welcome home' parade, the accolades of subduing the savage Chiss. The reputation that came with a successful campaign.

No, the Empire wasn't going to blink. And the Chiss weren't going to yield either. Two group intent on blasting each other to pieces and causing as much damage as they could.

"Sir!" A comm-officer yelled out from the bridge pit. "The sensor buoys we sent to the Csilla system are reporting a massive fleet dropping out

of hyperspace. We're also receiving an incoming transmission from those buoys by the new fleet."
"Chiss?"
"No sir," the officer hazarded a look towards Turi. "Jedi Ambassador Jaina Solo, sir…and the fleet of the Vagaari Empire?!"
Silence filled the bridge. Turi took that opportunity to step forward.
"Well, Lieutenant, open the line."
"Yes, ma'am."
"Solo, nice of you to stop your lazing about," Turi said sarcastically. "I was beginning to think me and Marek would have to do this whole war thing by ourselves."
"*Listen, Turi. Forget the whole war. Forget the Chiss and Empire,"* Jaina's voice sounded rushed, panicked. To Turi, that was not a good sign. "*We have little time before the biggest fleet of giant intergalactic bugs comes howling out of the Unknown Regions. It's the Killiks. They're mad as Kessel and they're definitely on their way. I hope the Imperial commander is listening because if both the Chiss and Imperials don't stop their stupid little war, the Killiks are going to make bantha fodder out of whoever is left."*
"Jaina?" Turi blinked, trying to force her brain to switch gears. "What are you saying?"
"*Blast it. Turi, the Killiks are coming."*
"How many?"
"Over a thousand ships," Jaina's monotone announcement hushed the entire bridge. "*So everyone, stop fighting and listen up. We either work together or we're all dead."*
(-==-(Chapter End)-==-)

Corellia
(-==-(I)-==-)
Jysellla Horn woke, her hand reflexively going to the breathing mask strapped to her face. It had been given to her shortly after her arrival, a simple filter keeping out the Killik pheromones that saturated the caves of Relephon. Evidently, the Killiks didn't want her or Valin to become Joiners. After some rather circular conversations, the youngest Horn managed to infer that enough of Alema's personality had survived the Joining process and that Alema was exerting a fair amount of will to the nest she had been Joined to.
It still didn't excuse waking up in a worn mattress, face-to-face with a Killik drone.
Once Jysella had gotten her Corellian curses out and had suitably backed her heart away from the massive heart-attack it had edged to,

she did her best to regain her bearings. The Killik drone continued to stare at her, emotionlessly, blankly, as if it was wondering why she was reacting the way she was.
She supposed telling it that very few beings enjoyed waking up to a giant bug staring you in the face, would be a waste of time.
"We are wondering why we cannot sense your thoughts," the voice of Alema Rar cut in.
Jysella whirled back around, her hand on her chest. "Force, Alema! Stop sneaking up on me like that."
The blue-skinned Twi'lek just tilted her head. "It is not our fault you cannot sense us."
Jysella shook her head, reminding herself that Alema Rar was currently part of a great bug-mind. Not that Alema had ever been 'normal' in her thoughts anyways. "Never mind, did you want something?"
"We surmised that you and your brother would be hungry. We have brought food from the Sapphire Palace for your consumption."
Surprised, Jysella blinked. "Thank you."
"You are welcome." Alema gestured and Jysella followed.
"What was that you were saying earlier, about that drone?"
"Yes, Aebea was wondering why Aebea could not sense your thoughts. All those here are Joiners or Killik. The absence of your thoughts was disconcerting."
"How?"
"Aebea knows you are here, yet at the same time knows not what you know. Many in Aebea are starting to wonder if you and Valin exist at all or are just figments of our imagination."
Jysella fought the urge to rub her forehead. Aebea was the nest Alema was Joined to, but it was also the term used by every single Killik belonging to the nest to refer to themselves. There were other nests present, and they all referred to themselves with their nest name too. Just thinking about it made her head hurt.
"I do have to ask, why *aren't* you trying to make Valin and I Join… Aebea?"
Alema cocked her head to the side "It is not needed. You already have a family a place to belong. Alema Rar did not. Lomi did not. The Kind gives family to those who have none. Ensures that they will never be lonely again."
"What about Zekk? You had him attack his allies, his friends."
"We did not. Zekk was Joined to Alaala, not Aebea."
"And they just decided to release him?"
Alema looked at Jysella again, almost as if she was humoring the Jedi's inability to understand what the hive-mind was thinking. "They did not.

We absorbed their nest to become Aebea-Alaala. Our will was stronger, so they released Zekk."
"Wait, you mean to tell me that there are conflicts between the Killik nests?"
"Yes and no. We are all Killik, acting for the good of the colony. If a nest is designated a sacrifice for the Kind, they obey. But before they do so, they leave their genetic material with another nest so that they might be reborn. There is no conflict. Aebea wants what Jooj and Lizil want. Lizil wants what the others want. Conflict only occurs if there are multiple ways to achieving a goal, and more than one nest in position to carry out the plan. As is the case with Hapes. Currently eight nests operate in Consortium space. Three are engaging the Hapans on a distant world. One remains here to build and grow. Two are…"
"But why?" Jysella finally blurted. "Why in the frozen wastes of Hoth are the Killiks doing this? Why Hapes? Why now? To conquer it? To rule it?"
"We care not for who rules," Alema answered, her voice devoid of tone. "Hapes itself is inconsequential. We could just have easily chosen Bakura or the Core. We simply came here because it was the will of the Kind."
"Okay, you said the 'Kind' before, and it sounded like a capital 'K'. The what?"
"The collective consciousness of what you would call the Killik hive mind."
"Oh."
"It does not matter to the Kind who lives and dies in this war. Their deaths were fated the moment the flow of time was disrupted."
"Stop right there," Jysella said steadily, holding out a hand. "You're telling me that the Killiks are causing all sorts of havoc, destroying planets, peoples' lives, governments, because if they don't, something much worse will come and destroy those things anyways?"
Alema's black eyes blinked slowly. "Yes."
"What about the Sith?"
"The Sith?"
"You know what Alema Rar knows, right?" Jysella challenged. "You know that the Sith are going to take advantage of this chaos and emerge once more."
"Their rule is preferable to an eternal night," Alema responded. "The Sith will rise and fall, much like the Jedi. The Kind has seen it before. Even the Sith will be cowed by the Eater of Dreams, her power unquestionable and unrivaled."

"The Kind is afraid of her," Jysella noted, sensing the foreign emotions emanating from Alema.
"We are." Suddenly Alema used her bond with Jysella and link the younger woman directly to the hive-mind. A deluge of memories, of images, bombarded the Corellian, causing her to gasp and reach out for the rocky walls to brace herself. Even as Alema spoke, as if a holovid was playing in her head, Jysella continued to witness events long, long past. "Aebea and Thuruht both existed during her first reign of terror. It was then that the entire galaxy shook in fear. Trapped as she was on a single planet, she still shook entire systems and sent whole populations mad with but a thought. Many of the Kind was sacrificed in creating her prison, distracting her so that she might pass her time in blissful sleep. The jailers then placed a burden upon the Kind, requiring us to aid in her recapture whenever she escapes into the greater galaxy. For a hundred millennia, the Kind had fulfilled this requirement, assisting the Ones in keeping her imprisoned."
"That's great," Jysella marshalling her strength to compartmentalize the Killik hive mind. "So why don't you just strengthen the prison and keep her from escaping in the first place?"
At that, Alema's face twisted into a wry smile. "A hundred millennia ago is a long time, even for the Kind. The knowledge we had possessed that let us understand the workings of her prison has been lost. Those who provided the instruction and directed the Kind are also no more. We know not how the prison works, we know not how to subdue *her* if she escapes again. We only know that it will be our duty to do so and that this time, we will fail."
"The Kind is panicking," Jysella noted. "So instead of fighting a losing battle, you're leaving the galaxy in flames."
"So that all the fuel will have been expended and she will have nothing to feast upon but echoes and ghosts. At least this way the galaxy can rise from the ashes of the broken shell it has become. If the Sleeper were to fully awaken, there won't even be ashes left."
"The Kind really needs a Plan B."
"This is our Plan B."
"A Plan C, then," Jysella shook her head. She allowed herself to relax as the collective mind of the hive withdrew. "Anything is better than burning the galaxy. We still have a chance, if we fight together."
"In the past, there were those who you might call Jedi today who once thought as you did."
"See, she can be fought."
"These pre-Jedi of millennia past made promises of victory against the darkness, hope where there was none. The enemy was only one in

number, but only one was needed to destroy entire races. Turning on each other, centuries of warring annihilated the wise people of Eron. Then, those who called themselves the Seoularians, rulers of thirty star systems, were stricken with a disease created by the Silver-Eyed One and were turned to dust by her wrath. The ones who called themselves Muurshantre, masters of the stars and the Force, had their world ripped in two by her power; its twelve moons sent hurtling towards their colony worlds like asteroids. There was the Sharu, witnesses to the destruction of these other races and driven mad, who sought to hide by stripping their own minds of anything of value. The Vahla, an entire race powerful in the Force, their leader became a puppet of the darkness; a false goddess controlled by a real goddess. They, their planet, are now but embers, dying in the cosmic winds. Even those who invented her jail, as powerful as they were, feared her, knowing the power she could bear. In time, they too grew weak and were laid low by the terrible darkness. The Chaos Bringer's minions were then allowed to ascend and rule over the galaxy. Fighting? Not fighting. Only consumption, death, the end of the galaxy."
"It sounds as if you've given up," Jysella challenged. "And if I know one thing about Alema is that she never gives up."
"Alema Rar will understand," Alema spoke. "Her mind has not yet processed all that the Kind has witnessed. Has not felt the burning of worlds, the breaking of minds, and the harvesting of souls."
"Listen, Aebea, or whoever you are," Jysella stepped out in front of Alema, blocking the Twi'lek's path. "It is not the Kind's right to give the galaxy up for a loss. It is not for you to say who is to live and die. The Kind are just one of hundreds, thousands, of species living in this galaxy. This 'Chaos Bringer' was defeated in the past, yes? That means she's not invincible. It means she can be beat again."
"Millennia ago, the other races saw the Force for what it truly is, not light or dark, black or white. The races of this era do not see the Force as the Kind does, do not even bother to try. Without the same understanding, any attempt to contain the Chaos Bringer is doomed to fail."
"Let me speak to Alema."
"Alema Rar exists no more, there is only the Kind."
"Alema Rar would kick your ass if she knew you said that."
"Her will still exists in Aebea's desire to protect you and your brother from the Joining. That is a decision the rest of Aebea does not understand. We offer a family, a place to belong, purpose. If you were to Join, you would truly understand the threat we face."

"No thanks." Jysella silently used the Force to get a better read on the hive-mind she was dealing with.
As a Horn and an inheritor of her dad's proclivity for mental manipulation, Jysella and her brother had always been able to see the mind of another differently than the others of their generation. To most Jedi, manipulating a mind would be akin to flipping a switch or inserting specific memories or emotions where they hadn't been before.
For both Jysella and Valin, however, that method was exceeding crude. Thanks to the Corellian Jedi Master Matarmeno Krahnn, a survivor of Palpatine's purge, they had been granted an audience with the Baran Do order on the planet Dorin. There they had learned many arcane Force mental abilities as well as how to hone their ability to absorb and manipulate energy. It had been an interesting several months of training, but Jysella knew that she and her brother had come away better for it.
And it was thanks to those abilities that she could fully sense the Killik hive-mind. A regular Jedi would feel a powerful, imposing, and immutable will; something akin to a solid wall with barbs to ensnare anyone who dare approached.
To Jysella, however, she could see the individual insect minds that made up the collective. Could see the simple thoughts of the Killik drones providing sensory feedback for the others. The vigilant reports of the Killik scouts on the surface, constantly scanning for anyone who dared to threaten the hive. And she could see the thoughts that belonged to those who weren't Killiks. The Joiners. It was as if the impassable wall was made up of millions of tiny, yet visible strands all woven together like a fabric. Jysella continued to study the Killik mind, using her bond with Alema to protect her as she grew close to the mental barbs.
"What are you…"
"Found her," Jysella looked up at Alema. "Not so Joined after all."
Alema's normally blank face hardened. "You would deny her the place we have given her?"
"False peace, happiness, feelings that aren't her own? You bet I am," Jysella countered, pulling out her comlink. "Big brother, I'm about to do something very crazy that will probably anger the several thousand bugs around us."
"*Go ahead*." Came Valin's deadpan reply
A quick check of their sibling bond revealed that Valin was also linked up to the hive-mind, scanning it in a way similar to her own. Only, he was using the techniques taught by the Baran Do to keep his mind hidden from the collective.

"You always did like your bugs. Ever since you convinced those ants to lift that rock so Master Solusar thought you were moving it with the Force."
"*Just do it, Jysella. I'm really not liking how big this collective is."*
Jysella looked back to Alema. Faster than the Joiner could register, Jysella reached out and pressed her palm to Alema's forehead. There was a massive jolt through the Force, and Alema's eyes rolled up into the back of her head. Jysella caught the Twi'lek before the older Jedi hit the ground. All around, bleeding through the rocky walls, a sense of bewilderment, of rage and loss, of sorrow and despair thundered like the crashing of waves.
Jysella saw several Killik soldiers skitter down into the hallway, weapons raised. The Jedi grimaced. "Sorry bugs, but not now." She reached out and promptly severed the soldiers' connection to their hive mind. Immediately the six insectoid warriors paused where they were. If the Killiks could have emoted panic and confusion, both emotions would have been plain on their faces. One by one, they lowered their weapons and beat a hasty retreat back through the tunnel.
"*Head to the surface, Sella.*" Valin called in over the comlink. "*I'm keeping a handful of sentries blind to our presence, but it's not going to last much longer.*"
Grimacing as she shouldered Alema's dead weight, Jysella just managed to hold up her comlink. "Roger, on my way. Keep the door open as long as you can. We only have a couple million bugs to outrun."
(-==-(II)-==-)
The downside to a hive-mind, or the plus side depending on your point of view, was that all it really took for the Horns to escape was to insert the idea that they didn't exist. As far as the Aebea section of the Kind knew, there was no one named Jysella and Valin Horn. The guests that had been present for the past two days had become Joiners and that was that.
"How come I have to carry Alema?" Jysella grumbled, supporting her still unconscious friend as she followed her older brother through another network of caves.
"Because you were the one who decided to cut her off from the nest all the way down here and not back on the surface," Valin deadpanned. Leading the way were two Killik drones he had 'hijacked' to guide them out of the labyrinth of caves.

"I didn't know how much time she had left," Jysella shot back. "It was hard enough digging into the hive-mind to recover her conscience. By the way, we do know where we're going, right?"
"To the Sapphire Palace. It's the only place that has any ships off this planet. You saw the hive mind, you know that the Killiks are being driven by Lomi and the bug queens on her side. We take them out, the Killiks will retreat back into the Unknown Regions."
"Great, we still have to find them in the sixty-three Hapan systems," Jysella muttered. Their journey's progress was marked by a sudden draft of frigid air that swept through the tunnel. Sapphire barely had an atmosphere, its temperature pretty close to the cold of space. After slogging through the claustrophobia-inducing warmth of the seemingly endless network of tunnels, the blast of icy air was both a boon and a curse. "And we can't stay invisible to the bugs forever. They've still got a pheromone bond thingy with Alema."
"We can always just leave her."
"Valin!"
"Okay, fine, we take her with us. What's your idea then?"
They emerged out from the cave. The good news was that they were now free of the Killik warrens. The bad news was that the towering splendor of the Sapphire Palace was nowhere in sight.
"We've emerged on the wrong side of the moon," Jysella groaned.
"I'm not going back in there," Valin jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "The hive-mind is already crazy enough as it is without us re-antagonizing it."
"What do our guides say?" Jysella gestured to the two Killik drones in front of them.
"Haven't got a clue," Valin replied dryly. "I cut them off from the collective, remember? The only things they know are what's in front of them and their own experiences. Which, with both being a couple months old, isn't all that much. This was the only way out of the nest they knew about, but they're probably hundreds more. So, again, what's your idea, Sella? This *is* your mission."
Jysella gestured with her head. "Can you reach into the right pocket of my robes? I have a holomap of this moon in there."
Valin obeyed as Jysella continued to support the unconscious Twi'lek. "Got it."
He activated the map and they both studied it. "There are two more mining communities within walking distance."
"Not good. Mining means tunnels, tunnels means bugs. They've probably become bug-huggers," Valin shook his head.

"Even then, those villages have to have comm-gear or a vehicle. A place to stay, some decent food." At that, Jysella's stomach growled loudly, letting her know that she should have stunned Alema *after* what was probably a delicious breakfast, not before. "We can use the Force to keep us invisible to the Joiners. They should be easier to deceive than the regular Killiks."
"Things have been going relatively well for us so far, why not."
"Drop the sarcasm Val. It's really getting old."
Valin just sent Alema's unconscious form a glare and rolled his eyes. "Then let's get moving. If the Killiks think they're threatened, they'll probably go all out on the Hapans to take them down with them."
The trip across the gray soil of Sapphire was filled with long moments of terse silence. Almost expectedly, Valin had executed their unwilling guides, not wanting the hive-mind to reabsorb the two and discover what they had planned. Jysella had decried the move, but the look on Valin's face told her she'd get nowhere with it. She and her big brother were on completely different pages, and neither seemed inclined to try to meet the other mid-way.
"There's the village," Valin broke the silence woodenly. "Don't think anyone's home."
Visible around a quarry pit was a collection of metal pre-fab shelters. All dust covered and in poor states of repair.
They pressed forward, their feet crunching the fine gray gravel dirt beneath them. Like most of the place they had visited in the Hapes Cluster, even this abandoned mining village was atypical of a usual abandoned mining village. The Force immediately let them know that there wasn't a living soul present. But what *was* present, however, was a persistent aura of despair and terror. As if what had occurred had been so traumatizing, the Force had preserved the feeling.
Jysella shuddered, absently reaching across her body to hug herself with one arm while still half-dragging Alema between her and Valin. "Great. Cross off this moon on the list of places we should never visit again. Heck, cross off this entire system."
Valin cautiously pushed open a door to a two-roomed dwelling on the outskirts of the village. It opened with an almost soundless swoosh. Everything inside was covered in the same fine gray dust that made up the moon. The inside was ransacked, debris covering the floor, a Killik-mandible-sized bite missing from the overturned plastisteel dining table. A giant hole in the second room floor, the bedroom, was evidence as to how the Killiks had entered the building.
Valin let the door slide shut again and exchanged a grim look with his sister. Coupled with the bone-chilling atmosphere, the sight hadn't

been encouraging. They moved on to the next building and found the same thing. Edging ever closer to the mining pit at the center of the village, they could see hurried footsteps preserved in the powdery gray ground. A mess hall for the mining crews was equally devoid of life and likewise containing a giant sinkhole within.
A glimpse through the Force let them see just how the panic had unfolded; a mountain of bugs climbing out of the quarry and forcing the defenseless miners into their homes where they thought they would be safe. Holes opening up in the ground inside the homes and office buildings, hapless miners dragged to their fates; whether it was to be food or to be Joiners, both were terrifying to think of.
They stopped at a three-story prefab structure that had the Hapan word for 'Administrator' written above the door.
"If this village had any worthwhile communicator, it'll be in here," Valin said, tilting his head back to look at the top of the building. A single antenna stretched out from the roof. It was still in one piece, a good omen. A vehicle hangar at the side of the building also looked promising. Using the all-purpose Jedi solution to a locked door, Valin made quick work of the thin sheet metal of the vehicle hangar and put his lightsaber away. There was a vehicle inside but…
Valin ran a hand through his hair as he stared at the many vehicle parts that surrounded a stripped apart speeder. The hole next to the disassembled speeder told the two Horns that the mechanics probably didn't have a chance to put the speeder back together before being dragged to their fates. "I guess we can't have everything go our way."
"Hope we can afford the time to piece this thing together," Jysella sighed.
"We'll make do somehow. This building probably has a place where we can rest up in the meantime."
"I'll work on undoing the bug-stuff with Alema. We'll need her if we run into a giant bug army. You make sure that the speeder is in one piece and that our friends know that there's a homicidal dark Jedi joined to a hive mind on her way."
"On it," Valin nodded once. "This entire trip better be worth the effort we're putting into it."
(-==-(III)-==-)
The mind was a very complicated place to be, especially if that mind wasn't yours; even more so if that mind was a Jedi mind. To most, the thoughts of another, their memories and life experiences, were a mystery. Some species could sense emotions by detecting pheromone levels or temperature changes. But even they couldn't see the thoughts that went along with those feelings.

The Force opened up new avenues for those able to wield it. But there was a reason why not every Jedi was as skilled with mental manipulation as the Halcyon family line. Why every Jedi didn't just wave their hand and end conflicts before they could begin. For one, you had to have a will stronger than the being you were trying to influence. And being the children of Mirax Terrik and Corran Horn, both Valin and Jysella had more than enough will to go around.

For another, you had to have a certain amount of empathy. The more you understand a person's views, regardless of whether or not you agree with it, the easier it is for one to 'sync' their minds to the other and do their Jedi magic. Of course, there is the added caveat of mental manipulation being something of a 'gray side' ability. Done right and you're a good Jedi helping to stop a conflict before it began. Done wrong, and you're treading the dark path by forcing people to do something they might not ordinarily do.

Needless to say, with a Jedi Master for a father, both the younger Horns had Jedi warnings and wisdom pouring out of their ears.

But fortunately, all that advice and lectures was coming in handy for Jysella. The youngest of the Horn family had laid Alema out on a bunk she had found in the main administrative building. A single glow lamp illuminated the small room, which ironically enough appeared to be a nurse's office of some sort.

Decorating the wall were posters of what to do if one received varying types of injuries while on the job. All of it was in Hapan, but one of the posters, which showed someone impaled by a mining tool, bending over and kissing their rear-end goodbye, was pretty self explanatory. A high tech med-bay this place wasn't.

"Come on Alema," Jysella whispered softly, using the sink in the room to wet a cloth and wipe the Twi'lek's head. "You're not going to let a bunch of bugs beat you. You're tougher than that."

Closing her eyes, Jysella fully reactivated her Force bond with Alema, and in another second, delved into the Twi'lek's mind.

Like diving into an ice cold lake after sitting in a sauna, Jysella's mind nearly shut down at the harsh sensations that bombarded it from nearly every angle. Panting, breathing heavily, her mental form flickered as she struggled to maintain her own identity in the mind of another. Pushing forward was like wading through a thick, viscous fluid, every step forward threatening to take her two steps back. What she was doing was not a simple task like skimming memories or even a more difficult one of healing a tormented mind. And the strain of the task on her own psyche became more and more evident as she pushed forward. Her mental self grimaced and fell to her hands and knees.

Let me in you stubborn piece of ronto droppings! I can't keep this up forever!
Finally, the resistance melted away, and Jysella found herself in an empty hangar. Everything around her appeared black and white, as if she was watching a monochrome holovid. Slowly, she rose to her feet, taking in the empty hangar, the asteroid belt floating outside, and the dark hallway that led away from the hangar, with a detached feeling.
"Where…"
"The Home."
Jysella looked over her shoulder. Alema was there, but this Alema looked a lot younger than the one Jysella had knelt by in the nurse's station of the Hapan mining village. She had yet to be scarred, yet to show signs that the dark side had twisted her mind in circles. In fact, this Alema looked a lot like the Alema Jysella remembered first seeing as a little girl of twelve years old. Full of mischief, silent delight, but with a thirst for vengeance and a dash of hidden pain.
"Alema?"
"Yup," Alema glanced up and down her hand. Then turned her head as if she had heard something. "Ooo, look, the show's about to begin."
In the same monochrome of the surroundings, Jysella saw another version of Alema walk with a very young Anakin Solo into the hangar.
"*Are you sure this is smart, Fearless Leader?"* the monochrome Alema asked almost playfully. "*Miss 'Look at me I'm obviously a Sith' is probably watching somewhere and I don't want to go through that obstacle course again."*
"*Probably not smart, but I haven't exactly been making the best of choices lately,"* younger Anakin shrugged. He looked gaunt, skin more pale than usual, his hair in need of a good cutting. "*We need to talk about what happened."*
"*What's there to talk about? I know the game. It's not happening again. When we learn what we have to from our esteemed master, we'll head back into the galaxy, and you'll get back together with Vong Girl. Heck, I'll even help."*
"*Alema.*"
Monochrome Alema shook her head. "*That's the way it has to be, Hero Boy. It was a moment of weakness for both of us. The dark side or whatever it is that this place is full of messed with our heads when we let our guards down. As much as I want it to be, there's no way in Hoth that you'll have a happy life if you go out with me. I'm all 'must kill all Vong' remember? Can't have the golden boy of the Jedi Order hanging out with a girl with a dark side death wish. Vong Girl's much more wholesome, especially since your brother fixed her head and…"*

"*Alema,*" Anakin stopped her, gently reaching up to wipe a tear that had somehow escaped her suddenly watery eyes.
Alema backed away, lekku twitching. "*Face it, Anakin. A happy ending isn't in my cards. Tahiri's definitely a lucky girl, you really do know how to kiss…and well…I'll just tell her that's all we did. It's not like we went all the way or that it meant anything. All we did was kiss, that's it. Okay? In fact, we should probably just…I don't know…forget it ever happened.*"
It was as if monochrome Alema's words struck a chord within Anakin, and his lips twisted into an ironic smile. "*You know, I'm starting to wonder if I'm actually any good in the kissing department. You're the second girl I've kissed and the second girl who's offered to forget the kiss.*"
Monochrome Alema did laugh at that. "*Believe me, you can make a girl forget what planet or Force-forsaken abandoned asteroid she's on with kisses like yours. I just…*"
"*Alema,*" Anakin cut her off softly, looking away at first, then back to her. *"No matter what happens when we go back to the rest of the galaxy, thank you for following me to this place. Even if…even if Tahiri forgives me for taking off like this…I don't think I can ever forget that time we shared. You're an amazing person, Alema Rar. Thank you for being my friend.*"
Monochrome Alema was silent for a very long moment, her head bowed, one arm hugging herself. Eventually, she tilted her head back up to Anakin, green eyes full of vulnerability and emotions only he would ever see.
"*And thank you for being mine.*" Alema stepped close to Anakin and gave him one more heartfelt kiss before stepping back. "*Now let's finish learning from this schutta and get out of this place. I don't think I can play the role of sycophant and acolyte much longer.*"
Anakin gently hugged her back in turn. "*Agreed.*"
The image flickered, and then the whole world seemed to spin for a moment. Jysella found herself on a different world. A world of ice, bitter cold, and full of ancient sorrows and anger. Jagged mountain peaks rose up all around her like a fast growing forest; a bleak and desolate world all around.
Jysella turned back to Alema and was surprised to see that the Twi'lek looked a bit older. The black tattoos the Twi'lek had picked up after her excursion at the Home, now decorated her face and arm. But she still remained unscarred, still had a life that burned brightly in her eyes.
"Where are we now?"

This new Alema gave a half shrug. "Ziost I think. I was following a lead and ended up here."
A small cargo ship descended into the atmosphere in front of the remains of an old temple of sorts. Another monochrome Alema emerged from this ship, but she wasn't alone. A black-haired human emerged from the ship, clad in a mismatch uniform no doubt acquired from a various surplus stores.
"*Are you sure this is the right place, Faskus?"* Monochrome Alema said lightly, a playful glint in her eyes. "*Because after Vjun, the planets we've visited seemed to have gotten less and less welcoming."*
"What do you expect, Ms. Rar? They've all played home to Sith at one time or another. When was the last time you saw a Sith work on his or her tan, or stop to enjoy the fresh air?"
"*Good point. And I know I've already said this, but thank you."*
"Not a problem," Faskus winked at Alema. "*Hard to say no to a pretty girl with a lightsaber. Especially one who threatens to slice you into firaxan bait."*
"*Flattery will get you nowhere,"* Alema rolled her eyes in turn. *"But really, you didn't have to pick me up after those pirates blew apart my fighter."*
"*You've helped me acquire a fair amount of credits with your unique skill set. I think you more than paid your way."*
"*And finding out the information on those Sith planets for me?"*
"*I'm sure I can get even more credits for the stuff I'll salvage. Don't forget that I made a killing off that lanvarok we found on Vjun. Those Hapan nobles paid top credit for it and it wasn't even in pristine condition."*
"*And after expenses, you promptly blew those credits on those five prostitutes at last port,"* Alema retorted, a smirk on her face as she lightly rested a hand on the butt of her blaster.
"*I did give you the option to join in the fun."*
"*Next time I have a party with five hunky human males, I'll extend the same offer,"* Alema shot back. "*You did realize that three of those Twi'leks you bedded were slaves?"*
"*Hard to miss. You punched your fist through their master's chest and freed them.* ***After*** *I paid."*
"*But not before you got your money's worth out of them,"* Alema said archly. "*I only put up with you because you saved my life and gave me a place to live."*
"*That and I'm too lazy to redeem the bounty on your head. You make me far too many credits"*
"*Well, that too. Can we get moving? Fortune awaits us."*

Jysella followed the monochrome duo up a flight of crumbling stone steps and into the ancient temple. The duo continued to banter, their words showing a familiarity with one and other as well as their mutual respect.
"*So, do you have any idea where we're going?*"
"*The Force is guiding me, but other than that, nope."*
"One moment, getting a comm-signal being patched through my ship."
Faskus held up a portable holo-comm unit and activated it.
After a split second pause, the image of a bronze-haired Bothan emerged. The man's uniform was just as piecemeal as Faskus' was, but with added admiral's bars and a general's cap. An eye-patch over one eye and acid burns across a bared shoulder completed the man's otherwise military appearance. "*Faskus, you thievin' rat. I have to hear you double-crossed us from a third party? That you're sitting on a bounty that will make all of us rich? Worse yet, the bounty was in the fighter we shot down and you had the gall to save her under our noses without informing any of us. Where's the honor in your actions?"*
"*Byalfin,*" Faskus said dryly. "*We're pirates. I apologize for hurting your manly Bothan feelings, but I'm a little busy at the moment so can you call back later?"*
"*Don't test me, Faskus! I am a wanted man. I have the death sentence in..."*
"*Yes, yes. I know,"* Faskus sighed. "*I **was** a part of your crew for the better part of the past few months since the war ended. I've heard that speech more times than I want to. I'll tell you what: we split the loot in this place and go our separate ways. If we're really careful, we won't even run into each other again. The galaxy's a big place."*
"*I have a counter-offer. I've recently acquired the funds and resources for a good-sized force. We're currently sitting in orbit with our guns pointed to your position. Come out with the fugitive and I'll think about being merciful just this once."*
"*You should take the deal you know*," Alema murmured to her counterpart. "*No sense losing your ship over this."*
"*You sure?*" Faskus raised an eyebrow.
"*Faskus, you have a cargo ship, not a military battle cruiser. You've gotten me this far, but now I think I need to continue my path alone. I'm sure we'll run into each other in the future, but this is the part where you bow out. Say I overpowered you and fled deeper into the ruins. I think my bounty's reached a couple million credits by now so Byalfin won't raze this place and risk killing me."*
"*Okay then,*" Faskus shrugged. "*I wish you luck on whatever it is you're planning to do, Ms. Rar. I know when to cut my losses."*

"*See you around the galaxy."*
Jysella was treated to a small adventure involving Byalfin's fleet actually firing on the temple Alema was in. As the ancient structure collapsed, Alema was deposited into some catacombs beneath. There, much to Jysella's shock, Alema somehow awoke an ancient ship. The scene fast-forwarded, the ship rising with Alema in it and proceeding to decimate the awaiting pirate fleet in orbit.
Again the world spun. Jysella found herself at the top of a high mountain overlooking a dusty looking valley.
"Sacrifice. Anyone can kill. Anyone with the right abilities can declare themselves a dark Jedi. But only a few are permitted to call themselves Sith," a raspy-voiced woman . "*Do you know why, Twi'lek?"*
Unlike before, Jysella was shocked to see the now scarred, monochrome Alema bend down to one knee. "*No, Lady Sani.*"
"*Dark Jedi draw their power from their emotions. Whether it be rage, a thirst for power, jealousy, fear. But a Sith, a true Sith, uses the strongest emotions of them all, the emotions that come with sacrifice. Only a well-meant sacrifice can stir up all the emotions a dark Jedi relies on at once. From anger, to despair, from love to hate."*
"*Sacrifice?*"
"*Yes. To kill a loved one. To cause the death of a friend who trusted you with their life. To excise from yourself the one thing that matters for the sake of moving on. That is the true definition of what a sacrifice is for a Sith. You cannot be a part of your Order without one."*
"*That's a relief then, Lady Sani.*"
"*Relief?*"
"*I have already sacrificed everything,"* Alema shrugged. "*My first master, my sister, I lost the man I love to another woman, I lost the place I thought I belonged to betrayal and naivety. I have sacrificed the trust of those who called me friends to pursue my own agenda. I have let my body be scarred by the One Sith so that I might serve them. Tell me, Lady Sani, are those not appropriate sacrifices?"*
The raspy-voiced woman cackled and shook her head. "*No. You know of suffering, of hate, of despair, of jealousy. But never at the same time. The death of your master made you despair. The death of your sister made you hate, I can see that within you regardless of how well you try to hide it. The man lost to another was not a sacrifice, but a surrender. Otherwise you would still be at his side. Your friends never truly trusted you. And the scars on your body are inconsequential. Tell me, how would you feel if I ordered you to kill the blond-haired girl I see in your mind. The one who stole your man? How would you feel if I ordered you to take the life of Anakin Solo and you obeyed? **That** is*

the level of commitment, the emotions you should feel. The ability to sever yourself from your past much like our Master has done. Without it, you will never be a true Sith."
Alema paused for a moment, then rose back to her feet. "*If the Sith require me to forget who I am, I want no part in it. I'll be on my way."*
Again Lady Sani cackled. "*Good, good. You have passed the first test. Our master does not want mindless peons who adhere to the antiquated teachings of Sith long past. They all followed the Sith doctrines and all fell because of it. He wants Sith who questions those teachings, who asks 'why' before killing, yet will obey his commands. The Rule of Two should never have been implemented, and he will make sure that the Sith will never again have to hide away."*
"*Enough games, Lady Sani. Am I in your little club or not?"*
"*You have already been accepted by Lord Krayt. It was whether it would be in the role of a disposable pawn or one of his generals that was in question."*
"*Yet I sense I've just become a disposable general."*
"*Indeed. Even the One Sith needs a few sacrifices now and then. Now, Night Herald, are you prepared to do what must be done to path the way for* ***His*** *ascent?"*
"*Overthrowing the galactic order, messing up the plans of the Jedi, getting my hands dirty. Why not?"*
"*Very well. Then one last test before you depart on your first mission."*
Lady Sani gestured and several young Twi'lek girls were brought out of a cave by a lightsaber-bearing Togorian dark Jedi. From the collars around their necks, and their very revealing clothing, the Twi'leks were obviously slaves. "*Your compassion. It has no place in our order. Kill these slaves, use lightning to do it. And do it one at a time so that the others may see what their fates will be."*
"*They're younger than even me. They pose no threat to the One Sith."*
"*So long as your heart remains conflicted, has the capacity for mercy,* ***you*** *are a threat to us. If you won't do it, then my apprentice, Morto, will."*
Alema's jaw clenched, her hands tightening into fists as she stared at the terrified expressions of the five gathered Twi'leks. Behind the Twi'leks was the large, muscular form of Morto. Sith tattoos, much like Alema's traversed his shaven arms, and his body was clad in a dark cloak and set of armor. The more she hesitated, the more she could sense Morto's willingness to earn Lady Sani's favor.
Finally, Alema fell back to what she and Numa used to do when they had been slave girls. When they did all they could to survive another day, to live on when all others died. What *she* had done to live on, to

endure even when the galaxy wanted her head. So long as it was her that lived, no one else mattered.
Her green eyes yellowed and she silently approached the nearest Twi'lek teen on the ground before her. She reached out, gripping the green-skinned Twi'lek's head with both hands. Almost wryly, she smiled. The Twi'lek hesitantly smiled back in turn. Alema bent down onto her knees to be eye-level with the doomed Twi'lek.
"I'm sorry, you probably don't understand why, but you have to die right now. Thank you for living for this moment, but you are no longer needed."
Jysella turned away as the screams of the Twi'leks, one by one, rose up into the arid, orange sky. When the echoes of the screams stopped, when the sky had darkened, Jysella turned back. The bodies of all five Twi'leks, still smoking from the lightning attack, lay around Alema in a circle. Alema, whose eyes were once again completely yellow. Whose cruel smile was not one Jysella recognized or associated with the normally playful and mischievous woman she had come to know.
"*Was that sufficient enough, Lady Sani?*"
"*It was, Night Herald. Morto will accompany you on your first mission. Do not let the One Sith down."*
Jysella found herself expelled from Alema's thoughts shortly after, awakening to find herself back in the nurse's station of the Hapan mining village. She was sprawled out across Alema's mid-section, her own skin feeling clammy and icy cold. She turned her head slightly and saw that Alema was awake and starring at her with a closed off expression.
"Hey," Jysella said, seating herself next to Alema's cot and running a hand through her sweat-slickened hair. "How do you feel?"
"Like me," Alema shrugged, her green eyes dull and lifeless. "You?"
"Okay, a little hungry though."
Alema nodded absently. "Why did you do it?"
"Huh?"
"Take me from them?"
"Alema…"
"I was at peace!" Alema shouted, her hands tightening into fists and pounding the sides of her cot. "I didn't have to care about what I did or what I had to do. I had a place I belonged! I had no burdens, no pain. It didn't matter that I wasn't Alema Rar anymore! I'm tired of being her. Tired of being the Night Herald, or Alema Rar the traitor, or Alema Rar the fugitive. I've killed more people than some diseases. Have so much to do, and with the Kind I could have done it!"
"It wasn't real," Jysella said in a small voice, shrinking back slightly.

"It was real enough to me!" Alema shot back, tears pouring down her cheeks. "You have no idea what it's like, Jysella. For once in my twenty-six years of living, I wasn't scared! For once I had a family, friends, who wouldn't die or go away. Aebea needed me, *me* of all people. Wanted me to be a part of their family. And…and I wanted to be a part of them too."

Jysella was stunned into silence at the raw emotions pouring from Alema. The tormented Twi'lek wasn't even making an effort to shield any emotion at all. Jysella could feel it all and it shook her to her core.

Alema turned in her cot so that her back was facing Jysella. "I can't do it anymore, Sella. Can't be Alema, can't be the Night Herald. You've seen some of the things I did, know that I've taken lives both deserving and innocent. I can't even look myself in the mirror and justify the things I've done to my own self! I keep saying that what I did was for to make the galaxy a better place. But so does Krayt and his minions. So do the Killiks who are trying to burn the galaxy. Some protector I am. Couldn't protect Numa. Couldn't save my master. Can't even turn to the dark side properly either."

Jysella released a slow breath, completely at a loss. Eventually, though, she recalled what her mother had said to her. The Alema Rar she knew and idolized was still in the broken shell of a woman in front of her, she just had to dig a little to find it.

"Then who do you want to be?" Jysella asked gently, reaching out with the Force to comfort Alema. "Let's say you had no burdens, no responsibilities. Who would you be, where would you go?"

Alema was quiet, her body shaking with silent tears. "I'd go back to Ryloth, before Numa and mom, and me were sold. We'd be eating spice-cake and enjoying the sun. Just two little girls running around without a single care in the galaxy. Thanks to those bugs, I remember it so clearly now. It was the only other time I was at such peace, where I had nothing to fear but the fears of little girls. I thought I had killed that little girl a long time ago. I guess I just forgot about her."

"When all this bug business is done, we can go back to Ryloth," Jysella murmured. "You, me, and if you want, the rest of the Horns."

"What would the point be? I can't get back that lost time again. Can't undo everything that's been done. I made my choices, crossed and burned my bridges. It'd be nice to have an Anakin-like vacation from the galaxy, but I guess only heroes like him get those sorts of breaks. Me, I'm just a girl in way over her head with so many lives riding on my choices, I'm being crushed under their weight. And by the way, if you mention something as cheesy as 'sharing' my burdens or some empathetic drivel like that, I'll Force slam you into the wall."

Jysella's mouth, which had just been opened to say the very 'drivel' Alema hated, closed again. Deciding that sympathy wasn't going to work, the youngest Horn changed tracks. "Well, you're crushed, drowning, and utterly pathetic at the moment. How is moping about the 'what ifs' and 'has beens' going to help anything?"
At that, Alema finally did turn back towards Jysella, watery green eyes full of pain. "Shush and let me wallow, Horn. I haven't had a chance to do so in forever."
"Wallow later, save the galaxy from an intergalactic invasion of space bugs first," Jysella shook her head. "Well, then we have that whole club of dark siders you decided to incite into invading the galaxy. But after that, *then* you can wallow."
Alema closed her eyes, a wry smile flickering into existence. "You've got a point."
The Force shifted, and Alema blinked. When her eyelids lifted, her green eyes were flecked with yellow once more. More than that, it was as if she had turned all of her emotional pain into a shield all around her; her form distorted through the lens of the emotional pain she had shrouded herself in. This caused Jysella to raise a questioning eyebrow. "Alema?"
"What, you won't let me wallow in my pain, I'm just taking a page out of Vong-Girl's book and swimming in it instead." She held out her tattooed arm and noted the darkened skin coloring. "Good for your dark-side complexion if anything else. Remember, Sith flaunt it, regular Jedi just try to bottle it up and pretend it doesn't exist."
"Can you tone it down around Valin, though? He's kind of a pain in the ass about that sort of thing."
"Tough for him." Alema swung her legs out of the cot and stood. "Besides, I don't need to dig too deeply to see that the war screwed up his head too. A pity he's going to end up more like his dad than your mom."
"Hey, he's still my brother."
Alema nodded absently, taking note of where they were. "We still on Sapphire?"
Jysella glanced at the chronometer in the room, surprised to see that several hours had passed since she had brought Alema to the room. "Yup, Val is trying to get our ride working."
Alema nodded again, taking a deep breath as she did. "Well, he better hurry. The Killiks are coming."
(-==-(IV)-==-)

"Took you long enough," a grease-covered Valin hissed as Alema and Jysella burst into the hangar. He had been seated atop the vehicle's cab in a meditative pose.
"No time, bugs coming!" Jysella called out. "Do we have a way out?"
"Zax is going to make a fly-by in a Corellian cruiser in another ten minutes or so. I was about to go get you two." Valin swung himself down into the cockpit of the heavy speeder and Jysella vaulted into the co-pilot's seat. Alema hopped onto the back of the speeder, where a turreted mining laser sat and pounded the top of the cab to signal she was ready.
Valin gunned the throttle, and the heavy speeder zoomed out of the hangar. Only seconds later, a swarm of Killiks burst out from the hole in the hangar floor .
"Good timing," Jysella commented, watching the mass of black bugs in the rear-view monitors.
Of course, because things were going good, they had to go bad. In a shower of rocky gravel, the ground on either side of the speeder erupted with the strength of an air-cannon. Valin swerved hard, tossing him and the other two Jedi about in their places. Three giant beetle-like creatures shook off the excess dirt and let out challenging brays in the thin atmosphere of the moon.
"Kolosolok!" Alema yelled in warning. "Bug tanks."
The ground shook as the three beetles charged after the speeder. The ground thundered with the heavy footfalls of the giant bugs, the intimidating thumping not missed by the fleeing Jedi whose hearts were pounding just as hard.
"They're fast!" Jysella yelped. One of the Kolosolok drew even with the heavy speeder and slammed into it with its significant mass. Pushing her brown hair out of her eyes, Jysella glowered at her brother. "Why can't I ever get in a get-away vehicle that's a race-speeder or A-wing? It always has to be a bus or a slug-speeder."
"You can always get out and run," Valin retorted, juking the unwieldy speeder again to avoid being crushed between two of the giant beetles.
"I just might!"
"Hey, Valin! Does this mining laser work?" Alema called out, hanging on for dear life as she was whipped back and forth in the turret of the mining laser.
"It should!"
"Oh, goody then." There was an audible hum as the massive laser charged up. The entire speeder then shuddered as the laser drew on its power source and promptly spewed a continuous beam of red

energy at the nearest charging bug. The high-intensity laser, meant for burning through rock, came in contact with the sleek shell of the giant beetle where it flashed prettily but didn't seem to do any real damage. But Alema wasn't finished. She tracked the laser downwards into the beetle's opened jaw. The laser punched through the soft tissue of the beetle's head and exploded out the top. With a garbled sound, the Kolosolok came crashing to the ground in a sliding stop.

The other two continued their assault, however, a massive tusk gouging the side of the unarmored speeder like a lightsaber through paper. Alema swiveled the turret to fire, but then the second of the giant beetles slammed into the other side, throwing her aim off.

"One at a time, boys!" Alema yelled out. She fired at one of the beetle's eyes, scoring a glancing hit and leaving it reeling in pain. But that was all the mining laser was good for. A side-to-side thrashing motion by the other surviving beetle clipped the barrel of the weapon and bent it at in inoperable angle. Seeing this, Alema cursed. "Gun is useless."

"Throw rocks at it or something!" Valin called back.

"Keep this bucket steady then!" Alema replied.

The blue-skinned Twi'lek unbuckled her harness and slid out of the turret. With a slash of her orange yorik-coral lightsaber, she promptly severed the heavy mining turret from its mount. A powerful gesture with both hands, and the mining laser was sent flying outwards like a ballistic missile. The last of the three Kolosolok received a face-full of defunct mining turret, which exploded against its thick tusks in a small flash. The Kolosolok shuddered but then renewed its assault, its determination clear in the Force.

"Should have stopped where you were," Alema muttered darkly, her lightsaber still humming in one hand, lightning beginning to crackle in the other.

"Corellian cruiser is directly above us, trying to direct them to a pick-up site," Valin announced.

"Let me deal with big and ugly first." Before either Horn could offer a protest, Alema leaped off the back of the speeder, her lithe form completely puny against the much larger mass of the Kolosolok Killik beetle. The beetle brayed in challenge, its two large scythe-like tusks sweeping through the air at Alema.

Alema narrowly avoided, and then pushed off of one of the tusks with one hand. Her lightsaber, in the other hand, flashed once and severed the tusk at its mid-point. Before her momentum died, she pirouetted and thrust her other hand out, giving the beetle a blast of Sith lightning to its face. Howling, the beetle reared back, and Alema kicked off its

foreleg and landed on the opposite tusk. There she ran up the length of the bony length and pounced onto the top of the beetle's armored head. She jammed her lightsaber downwards, but the thick carapace prevented any real damage from occurring. Nonetheless, the Kolosolok bucked wildly, trying to throw her off.
One wild thrashing of its head did launch Alema back into the air, but she came down with lightsaber extended and gouged out one of the beetle's eyes. There she hung, gripping to her lightsaber as the beetle continued to thrash in pain, the glowing blade lodged into the side of its head.
She was flipped into the air once more. This time, she twisted herself and landed back on its head. Unlike last time, she landed with definite authority. She used the Force to enhance her impact and drive her lightsaber through the divot of her previous attempt and into the brain of the giant creature. The impact sent the creature's head into the ground, the entire body following in a ground-shaking impact. A death-rattle escaped the beetle as it was lobotomized by Alema's forceful landing, and it soon went still.
Like a cat that had its fill, Alema sauntered off the dead insect and smirked at the disbelieving looks on both Valin and Jysella's face.
"Now we can go," Alema climbed back on to the back of the speeder.
"Some things don't change, I guess," Valin rolled his eyes, restarting the speeder.
A Corellian shuttle made a fly-by.
"There's our ride out of here," Jysella chirped brightly, waving at the shuttle as the speeder kept up with its slow pass.
"Good," Valin sighed in relief. "I can't wait to get out of the Hapes Cluster entirely."
Alema cocked her head to the side and looked at Jysella, jerking a thumb towards her brother. "Does he take negatude lessons from Anakin or something?"
"Probably watches the holocron like a motivational vid," Jysella nodded mournfully.
They dismounted from the speeder and began walking towards the shuttle. As they did, however, all three began to sense nothing but danger pulsate all around them.
Using the Force, Valin quickly had the shuttle take off once more, and it was not a moment too soon. The ground the shuttle was on collapsed in on itself. While the shuttle struggled to stay airborne, the rocky hills all around it shifted. Killik warriors by the hundreds began to unburrow themselves out from the rocky soil. The sinkhole that had nearly

swallowed the shuttle allowed for a handful of additional Kolosolok to emerge.
"I think we just kicked the Killik-equivalent to an ant's nest," Valin groaned.
The shuttle pilot quickly recovered, steering the vessel over the Jedi. The hatch opened, and Valin's apprentice, Omwati Jedi Tiu Zax, stuck her head out. "Come on!"
The three Jedi needed no further encouragement, leaping into the air and piling themselves into the shuttle.
"Hold on!" The pilot yelled.
What looked like a blizzard of contrails arced up from the surface of the moon as hundreds of rockets were fired into the air.
"Don't they know the definition of overkill!" Jysella yelled.
"Stand back, Master," Tiu yelled, pushing Valin away from the door and taking his place. She held out a hand and concentrated, sending several rockets flying off-course and into others trying to kill them. The blast buffeted the shuttle, and Tiu was nearly thrown out the open hatch. Fortunately, Alema promptly reached out with the Force and yanked the teenager back in.
"Save the feats of stupid daring for those that can actually survive them, kid," Alema chided, closing the hatch. "Pilot, can we get off this ball of rock please!"
"With pleasure," the pilot promptly punched the throttle and sent the shuttle zooming away from the bug infested moon. It broke the gravitational pull of the moon seconds later, streaking for the Corellian *Strident*-class cruiser. The trip was made without incident, and the Jedi quickly scrambled out of the ship and made their way to the bridge.
"Captain, get us out of here."
"Would love to Jedi, but we have a problem."
The dread in the season captain's voice was coupled by a truly alarming sight. Following his pointed finger to the viewport, what the team of Jedi saw had even their jaded minds freeze up.
Alema was the first to speak, shaking her head in disbelief. "Okay, that is *so* not fair."
"Please tell me we have reinforcements on the way?"
"Negative, all fleets are protecting worlds allied to the Queen Mother. This was supposed to be a quick in and out."
"Tell that to them, captain," Valin punched a finger at the view outside.
"Val!" Jysella hissed. She turned back to the stunned Corellian officer. "Captain, now would be a good time to call for help. We can't let these bugs go anywhere."

It was easier said than done. Like a roaring river with tributaries, streams of Killik dartfighters streaked out from Relephon's depths and its many moons. Larger ships, like driftwood, accompanied these streams of fighters at random intervals, likewise emerging from the gas giant and its many moons.
"Sensors picking up well over three hundred fighters, dozens of the larger ones," the sensor operator swallowed fearfully. "Unknown capabilities, detecting no shields."
Alema snorted. "With that many ships, who cares? Even if we bring the entire Corellian battle group in, we'll still be outnumbered at least seven to one."
At that, nearly the entire bridge crew looked at her with raised eyebrows. Self-consciously, Alema folded her arms in front of her. "What? It's true."
"Alema," Jysella said patiently. "You're on a Corellian vessel."
"What does that…oh, right, odds," Alema shook her head. "Well, at least I'll go out in a blaze of fire instead of the inside of some giant space bug."
"That's the spirit," Jysella grinned. But then even she cast a nervous glance back out the viewport. In the face of the hundreds of Killik vessels swarming outside, even the current odds seemed unbeatable to a Corellian. "I hope."
(-==-(Chapter End)-==-)

Anakin
(-==-(I)-==-)
To the people of Denon, it was business as usual. Speeders flew about in the traffic lanes in an impatient, but sedate pace. The great holo-signs affixed to the towering apartment buildings continued to hawk whatever wares they displayed, and the streets were full of people going about their business. Even the majority of Denon's security and police forces had no idea what was about to unfold. If told that there was a fight going on, one that could alter the course of the galaxy, they would assume the battle was occurring in the Senate chambers or in the distant reaches of space.
But deep beneath the surface city, a different sort of fight than the one imagined by these security forces was unfolding.
Galactic Alliance military ground units were advancing on dozens of locations spread out across the Old City. Special Forces were likewise heavily active, moving in and neutralizing select targets ahead of the main body. And though underground, even the Galactic Alliance Navy got to play a part, employing squadrons of armed sky-hoppers and air-

speeders to provide air support. Thousands of men and women of the Galactic Alliance Defense Force were on the move, a massive operation unseen since the time of the Yuuzhan Vong War.
And this was just the forces active on Denon.
Throughout the galaxy, sites and systems identified by the Jedi, by rumor, or by direct cries for help, were playing host to Galactic Alliance fleet elements. All leave had been canceled, all reserves had been called up, and every ship available, even ones about to be mothballed, were pressed into service. The Jedi Praxeums of Yavin and Ossus, and the Temple at Denon were all in full swing, its Jedi spread throughout the fleets to aid in the eradication of the Killik threat. Even the reclusive Bakurans had realized the danger possessed by the Killiks and loaned their own ships and ground units for the pan-galaxy wide campaign. The Mandalorians were likewise clued into the danger by Doran and Kyrelle, and were loaning their newly built fleet of *Keldabe* Mark II-class battleships.
At the center of it all, Anakin Solo grimly listened to the reports of the combat units already engaging the enemy. The Galactic Alliance forces quickly learned that orbital bombardments didn't help at all. The Killiks simply disappeared underground, then re-emerged when the troops landed. Another costly lesson was that most of the bugs had a fairly high resistance to blaster fire, but that slug-throwers and plasma weaponry could slice through their reflective chitin with relative ease. It was almost as if the Killiks had evolved to be resistant to laser-fire. Which ironically enough, meant that the Mandalorian, New Yuuzhan Vong forces still in the galaxy, and the Outer Rim military units were having the most success.
"How are we doing?" Anakin asked, sensing his aunt enter the room. The said room was the inside of a Galactic Alliance Assault Walker, currently based in the Old City a few kilometers from a Joiner base.
"We've managed to persuade all the black-market arms-dealers on Denon to hand over their supply of illegal but high-grade weapons as a humanitarian favor," Mara replied grimly. "We still only have enough non-laser weapons to equip about a fifth of our forces, but we'll have to make do." She paused to sit down next to Anakin. With a brief gesture at the comm-system, she looked at her nephew. "Any more surprises from out there?"
"A few victories have already been declared in the fringe territories. The Mandos are moving on to their secondary and tertiary objectives."
"Of course," Mara snorted.

"We're also losing good people," Anakin said, the strain of that fact clear in the drawn expression of his face. "A Killik fleet completely annihilated the taskforce sent to clear out the Batorine system."
"What? How? Wasn't that fleet group close to twelve capital ships?"
"As close as we could gather, the Blood Carver Force Adepts were Joined," Anakin answered tersely. "The distress signal was a trap and by the time the fleet entered the system, it was too late. We're not sure if the fleet is destroyed or not, but last transmission reported that all twelve capital ships were compromised by Killik borders. We lost communications after."
"You couldn't have seen that."
"I should have predicted it"
"Anakin…"
"I know, I know. We're not all knowing. But still, I personally approved that mission. From the distress signal, the Blood Carvers were facing a relatively small force. But I forgot that the Blood Carvers were also an insect race and, like the Verpines, were more susceptible to Killik influence. The Killiks only needed a small force to compromise the entire planet, and everything else after that was child's play for them. I…I…"
"Those ships won't be the first lost to a trap, nor will they be the last," Mara said. "What you have to do now is focus on the present. All units are in position on Denon and awaiting your order to begin operations. While you deal with this problem, I'll reroute several Jedi-embedded ships to Batorine. We can't let the Killik presence there grow any stronger if the Blood Carver Adepts are Joined."
"Right," Anakin released a quick, loud breath and nodded, removing the headset he had been wearing. "Thanks."
"Any time."
Anakin left the command walker, nodding to several soldiers on the way, and headed towards the forward observation post. The outcropping of ruined building looked over a vast tract of land that stretched for kilometers, and was as dark and gloomy as the rest of the undercity.
Filled with dilapidated buildings several dozen stories high, the area had once been the 'downtown' region of Denon's capital city. Sprawling, abandoned super-malls, towering highrises, and many tiered walkways; even if the place hadn't been a run-down haven for the downtrodden, it would have been a nightmare to take. In its current state of disrepair, it was more than a nightmare. The crumbling buildings no longer followed their ancient blueprints, the cluttered walkways were unstable and visible from above and below. Highrises

by the dozens looked over everything, while the district descended almost a kilometer downwards. And this wasn't counting the ancient sewer systems.
From a tactical standpoint, urban warfare was almost as bad as fighting an infantry battle on Hoth during a blizzard. The worst part was, many of the towering structures served as the foundations for the surface city, taking bombardment of the area off the table. There was also the fact that the Jedi Order and sinking galactic government wanted to take the Joiners alive as well, for image purposes of course, which didn't make things any better. The only way to do that was to send people into the death trap and pray for the best.
And of course, the Colony had decided to make their base at the heart of the nest of ruined structures. They had also become entrenched over the years, with scans showing they occupied over a dozen levels of the abandoned shopping sector. A sector that spanned for nearly a kilometer and a half.
Anakin mentally cursed whatever intelligence personnel had been keeping tabs on this. For this level of Killik infestation, blind-eyes had to have been turned. With the hundreds of thousands of war-refugees, poor, and illegals existing in the Old City, *someone* should have realized something was wrong. The alternative was that the people in GA intelligence were Joiners too, and that had already been ruled out.
And now the problem had somehow plopped into his lap, despite the fact that he was supposed to be working on the *other* intergalactic problem with the Yuuzhan Vong.
"Sir, all units reporting ready," a military-style voice announced from behind him.
Anakin briefly glanced over his shoulder, lowering the electrobinoculars he had been using. A man who was probably older than Anakin's own father stood at attention, face blank from military discipline.
"Thank you, Colonel," Anakin acknowledged, reading the man's rank from his uniform. "What do you make of this?"
Anakin handed the man the electrobinoculars and gestured to a distant location.
The officer peered into the binoculars in the direction and took a moment. "It looks like there's something attached to the under-sides of those balconies. Doesn't look too solid, but it's definitely not part of the original architecture."
"This is one of the times I appreciate my brother's old habit of caring for lethal creatures," Anakin said mildly. "If anything I think they look like giant wasp nests."

The colonel looked to Anakin in alarm. "But there has to be hundreds of them! Some of them spanning entire floors of some of those buildings out there."
"Information on the Killiks suggest that they've absorbed and adapted nearly two dozen different insect species, sentient or otherwise, in their many millennia of existence. This isn't counting the Joiner population and recent acquisitions."
"How do you want to proceed, sir?"
"Get me every single sharpshooter and sniper up here," Anakin replied. "Also, I want incendiary rounds loaded."
The colonel raised an eyebrow at the 'hero' of the Galactic Alliance. "Sir, scans still show that the population of non-Killiks in the region still numbers in the tens of thousands. If we use incendiary rounds, chances are a fire will grow out of control."
"And if we send our people in, they'll get massacred trying to hold off whatever is in those nests *and* the Joiners. We can use tranq-rounds or lethal rounds, but not at the same time. Hopefully a fire will draw the Killiks out so we don't have to face them when we go in."
"A fire might also weaken the supports. Engineers say that they can't estimate how much damage the aging structures can take."
"I read the same reports. The risk is still within an acceptable range," Anakin nodded.
"Sir, yes sir."
Anakin closed his eyes and linked up to the pulsating Battle Meld that was made up of the dozens of Jedi operating on Denon. *It's time, begin your assaults.*
He received affirmatives from every location. When he opened his eyes again, a part of his mind could see the multiple attacks on Colony bases unfolding all throughout the planet. Most of the bases were much smaller than the one before him, but no less dangerous.
Nearly a hundred men and women joined him on the outcropping, each with long-blasters and weapons capable of picking off targets at insane ranges. Plasma projectiles, rail-charges, lasers, all traveled until they hit something or ran out of energy. And though their targets were still a fair distance away, the weapons these Special Forces soldiers carried could still be lethal at two kilometers.
"Concentrate on the growths attached to the buildings and walkways," Anakin directed, bringing the electrobinoculars back up. "Incendiary rounds on the larger patches. After the first shot, be prepared to pick off targets of opportunity. Get into position and fire on my command."
The snipers all dropped into position and began dividing up the targets. In the meantime, Anakin used the Force to reach out to his forward

commanders. Uldir and Klin-Fa commanded the left flank, Barrak'l, Kyp Durron, and Octa Ramis the right. The center lines were the job of Tahiri and Waxarn Kel. Tekli commanded the medical forces and acknowledged her readiness at his request.
Not sure what type of ant's nest I'm about to kick up, be prepared for anything.
Receiving their support, Anakin released a long breath. "Snipers, ready?"
"Affirmative," the unit leaders reported.
Several more seconds ticked by, Anakin gazing at the shadows of the abandoned structures with trepidation.
"Fire."
It was like a bomb went off. The sound of a hundred sniper rifles firing in eerie unison. Streaks of red, of yellow, and purple, all lanced outwards towards the sprawling Killik-occupied territory. All hit their mark, igniting a fierce firestorm amid the grease and dust-covered duracrete structures.
"Second round, fire. Then fire at will."
The snipers fired again. And again, pouring long-distance shots into their targets. As predicted, a firestorm quickly erupted, the organic nests proving to be excellent kindling, and dark smoke accompanied by a hellish glow soon billowed outwards.
But something was dancing within the thick clouds of smoke, backlit by the fire. Many somethings. The shadows flickered and fluttered through the plume of black smoke, coalescing into mass so angry all the Jedi could feel it.
"Steady," Anakin announced, eyes narrowed.
Then, as if a bubble had popped, the black swarm erupted out of the smoke en masse.
"All units, open fire!"
Lasers and all sorts of projectiles bombarded the cloud of bugs. Yet the bugs continued to press forward, their thick carapaces flaring as they dissipated glancing hits. Through the electrobinoculars, Anakin could see that the black-plated bugs were about half the size of an average human, with a jagged stinger as long as his arm. Definitely not something one wanted to be near.
The constant attack by the Galactic Alliance, however, intensified, accompanied by incendiary rockets and blasts from flamethrowers. Within minutes of the attack, the entire swarm of giant-sized wasps had been neutralized. The silence that followed was punctuated by the distant crackles of a fire burning out of control.

"Stay on station." Anakin directed to the unit commanders. He then stepped off the broken building and dropped several stories, his Jedi robes fluttering. He landed in front of the gathered division of soldiers below, nodding at his wife and Jedi Apprentice Hedda. "Hey."
"Hi yourself, Hero Boy. Had fun playing commander?" Tahiri said lightly.
"Not that hard. Point your finger and tell people to shoot at what you're pointing at. Wave your hand somewhere, and people march in that direction," Anakin replied with a small smile for Hedda's benefit. "Watch."
He stepped out in front of the gathered soldiers and with a single hand gesture, motioned towards the burning, defunct shopping district. As one, the soldiers began to push forward, their weapons at the ready. Tahiri rolled her eyes, something echoed by some of their friends in the Battle Meld. "Alright Hero Boy. Let's just do this and go home."
Anakin inclined his head solemnly and sent out several messages through the Force. All units were operating under a communication's blackout unless there was an urgent need. They had drilled for two weeks, and each squad down to the last soldier knew what was expected of them.
The black-armored Galactic Alliance assault force spread out like a plague, descending down the broken and abandoned structures to their target. Twenty-thousand strong, backed by walkers, speeders, and droid squadrons, the might of the Galactic Alliance pressed forward.
And then, through the curling black smoke and flickering flames, the Killik Joiners began their counterattack. Laser fire of their own lanced out at the approaching commandos. Laser fire, metal slugs, plasma bolts, and an equally diverse array of weaponry streaked out from all directions like a lightshow.
A concussive missile exploded in the middle of several troopers, throwing them into the air. Metal slugs gouged out aged duracrete with near-misses. Lasers burned through armor or superheated skin. The shadows of the Joiners streaked left and right as they darted from one location to another, peppering the Galactic Alliance forces whenever they could. Some were even firing turrets hidden in alcoves or shadowy corners of the sprawling complex.
Explosion echoed throughout the empty structures, the sound reverberating through the ancient walkways and walls. Everywhere, the Galactic Alliance forces dove for cover. Some weren't as lucky and were picked off by the fanatical protectors of the Colony. Others were

sent tumbling off the walkways to their deaths by shockwaves and sonic blasts.
But there was no panic, no disorderly scramble. Flames licked at them from all around, suffocating smoke curled up from below. Yet, these were hardened soldiers, many of whom had served in the Yuuzhan Vong War and had seen much worse. Even with the blazing orange and red glow all around, the death flying left and right, they kept their calm and waited for their own opportunities.
Pressing forward, Anakin and Tahiri's lightsabers burned through the darkness, purple and brilliant white flaring with every round they intercepted. Other Jedi in the formation likewise stood at the forefront of the withering counter-fire, their own sabers dancing through the darkness of the Old City. And one by one, the Galactic Alliance units leap-frogged from cover to cover.
"Hedda?"
"They're Joiners, all of them!" Hedda called out, standing behind Tahiri and Anakin and using a specialized range-finder to tag every hostile she was seeing. "Give me a moment!"
She held up a remote control and typed in a command. In an instant, the YVH-3 droid units accompanying them raised their rifles and began to systematically pick off each of the assailants tagged. The tranquilizer rounds fired with machine-like efficiency. Turret emplacements fell silent, Joiners began to drop wherever they stood. The Joiners began firing on the attackers, but bubble-like shields flared to life around the droids and nullified the attack. The Joiners were then neutralized in quick succession. And while the droids began to draw the fire, Galactic Alliance soldiers popped up and began using their own stun and tranquilizer rounds.
"Nighty-night!" A gas grenade was hurled into a building teeming with Joiner activity. Its soft clinking sound as it bounced off a wall was inaudible over the chaos of battle, but its effects were hardly missed. The quick cloud that shot out from the grenade and engulfed the Joiners promptly dropped said Joiners in a heart-beat.
Several more grenades were launched from weapons or thrown, and the Joiners began dropping at an even faster pace. The proverbial straw that broke the resistance was when Galactic Alliance shuttles zoomed overhead, and commandos fast-roped out of them and stormed the more heavily defended locations.
The battle was quick and decisive. After another building was taken by the commandos, the Joiners on all sides began to withdraw. From the first sniper round to the end of enemy fire, the entire battle had taken all of three hours.

"Clear!" A voice shouted.
"Zone Three, clear!"
"We're clear over here!"
Anakin released a breath and deactivated his lightsaber. He gazed down the darkened street, willing himself to see what might unfold in the coming minutes and hours. The first few blocks of the district were taken, but there was still a long way to go.
"Great job, people. Get the wounded out of here and set up the forward command post in that old storefront there. Set up the automated turrets in the allies there and there, and get some snipers into these buildings around us," Anakin directed. "Use those buildings there to hold our Joiner friends. I want the science teams up here looking after them and working to undo the damage."
Nods answered his command and the soldiers executed his orders with their customary efficiency. In the meantime, Anakin continued to walk through the few blocks they had taken. The downside to taking territory was that they now needed to keep it. The Killiks might not have expected such a heavy-handed attack on their primary base, but they were certainly aware of the threat now.
A fact emphasized when he suddenly felt the equivalent of a Force sledgehammer slam into his mind. He dropped to one knee, gasping from the pain that traveled through the entire Battle Meld. A few droplets of blood left his nose and landed on the soot-covered duracrete walkway. Another mental sledgehammer, and he was on his hands and knees. From the impressions he could feel, the sledgehammer was hitting all the other Jedi in the meld as well.
Anakin mentally cursed. As strong as he was, it was Jacen who was normally better with the esoteric, mind-stuff. Deciding to take a page out of his sister's book, he summoned the Force around him for a brute-force solution. When the third attack came, Anakin met the mental pressure with his gathered strength and forced a link to his attacker.
That wasn't very nice, Raynar, Anakin chided, breathing heavily and unsteadily rising back to his feet.
Raynar is no more. Only the Prime Unu. You will regret attacking my family. If one could yell through the Force, the thoughts of Raynar Thul would have been a decibel above that.
Anakin grimaced, his mind still aching from the psychic attack. *And you'll regret messing with mine.*
With a collective effort, the Battle Meld helped him shove Raynar's presence away. But they all felt the Joined Jedi's emotions.
Vengeful determination.

"Sir! Seismic sensors picking up activity from all around us!" A voice called out in the background.
"Several dozen unidentified airborne contacts heading this way!" Another warned.
"Contact! Contact! We have a large number of Joiners engaging the perimeter patrols! Get Second Platoon out here!"
Anakin's resigned mood was echoed by the others in the meld.
They all agreed on one thing.
Raynar Thul wasn't about to go down without a fight.
(-==-(II)-==-)
The whistle of a Killik-fired artillery shell filled the air, shortly before the ground shook and a bloom of fire erupted in a distant street. Just because the Killiks were primarily using out-of-date weapons didn't mean the weapons weren't lethal. And unlike the Galactic Alliance, who was constrained by galactic weapon treaties, the Killiks could deploy all manner of weapons.
A speeder full of explosives careened down a narrow street and rammed sidelong into a Galactic Alliance hover-tank, annihilating both vehicles. Unconventional weapons, poison-tipped darts, chemical rounds, shells full of nerve gas, all came hurling out of the smoky shadows with pure abandon. Banned by various treaties, disintegrating weapons that would make Dengar proud likewise flashed from the dark nooks of the shopping district, occasionally vaporizing an unfortunate soldier. Suicide Joiners, strapped with thermal detonators, leaped from high heights or climbed up from below and ravaged whole squads at a time.
In short, the Killiks just didn't care what they fired at the Galactic Alliance positions, so long as it killed people.
The shrieking of plasma-casters hurling their liquid metal projectiles, the constant woofing of slug-throwers, and the whine of multiple blasters firing formed a retort to the deadly hail of explosive shells. Galactic Alliance soldiers were entrenched on multiple levels of the shopping district, pounding Killik positions with pinpoint fire and giving as good as they got. Which was plenty.
In the midst of all the chaos, however, a team of twelve slipped through the ranks of the Killik defenders and headed towards the heart of the shopping district. And of course, the only way to do that was repel down the side of a towering structure as the battle was waged all around that.
"So far so good," Jedi Apprentice Hedda whispered to Anakin and Tahiri, surrounded on all sides by Jedi more experienced than her own thirteen years of age.

Waxarn Kel, Maika, and Toile, clad in black, head-to-toe, commando outfits, formed one fourth of the team. From the blasters strapped to their hips, to their lightsabers and lethal aura, they were the team's muscle.
Uldir, Denon temple's Raxi and Siare, in standard Jedi robes, formed another fourth. From Denon, the two apprentices were the only ones of the team to have actually been in the undercity before, and knew the ins and outs not marked by any map.
And representing the Ossus Praxeum was a trio led by Jedi Master and archivist Mander Zuma, one of Tionne's own apprentices. With him were *his* apprentices, sixteen year old Duros Ohali Soroc and fourteen year old Pantoran Loli. They wore armored green jumpsuits, and were there to not only record whatever would unfold and provide info about the Killiks, but also to give the meld additional juice. Master Zuma was very strong in the Force—a definite plus for their meld—and a master in the Jedi method of Empty Meditation; a technique designed to combat mental attacks; very useful when facing a bunch of telepathic spacebugs.
"Nothing going wrong, that's always a bad sign," Tahiri whispered back to the blond girl, dipping a bit lower. Attached to her back was a backpack carrying one of the 'Killik jammers' developed by the Yuuzhan Vong shapers. Short-range only, it prevented any Killiks from sounding the alarm in the event they were discovered.
"Really?"
"It's one of Anakin's plans," Waxarn voiced softly. Repelling down Hedda's opposite side, he and his two Death Knights were constantly on the look-out for a threat. "They normally work out, but never as planned."
"I'm not sensing anything in the Force."
"The Force, as you feel it, isn't everything," Anakin murmured. "There are aspects of the Force we can't ever hope to understand."
"Starting to sound like a mystical Jedi Master there, Solo," Uldir commented.
"Right, thanks for the warning."
"I resemble that remark," Master Zuma interjected wryly, shaking his head at the younger Jedi.
"You guys know that this is a *stealth* mission, right?" Raxi piped up.
"And am I the only one that thinks having a blind, barely-able to use the Force guy on this top-secret mission a *bad* idea?" Siare voiced.
"Of the twelve of us, you and Raxi are the only ones that have actually been in this part of the Old City before," Uldir whispered.

"With an entire team of engineers and medics, during peace-time, without any giant bugs. The whole lasers flying back and forth and people dying violent deaths isn't really my scene."
"Hey, at least you can't actually see the people getting killed," Raxi muttered.
"The last time we went up against these bugs, we didn't exactly have a shining moment of heroism," Siare said. "Marek had to thump us on the head after we tried to kill her. And if a Jedi like Raynar can get bug-ified, what chances do we have?"
Raxi repelled down next to her half-Miraluka and gave him a brief peck on the lips. "Don't worry, Siare. I'll protect you."
Face half-hidden by the bandana folded over his eyes, it was hard to read his reaction. But when Raxi began to pull away, Siare reached up and grabbed a hold of one of her wrists. "That's one of the things I'm worried about, Raxi. Ever since we were kids at the temple you always looked after me and the others. But this isn't then. We screw up, we're very dead. We got lucky last time."
"Why didn't you say any of this *before* we started this mission," Raxi hissed.
Siare gestured to the battle being waged several levels above them. "I guess feeling creatures and people die en masse kind of made things real. And if I can feel that…if anything happens to…"
Raxi cut him off with another quick kiss. "Nothing will happen to us. Right Master Lochett?"
"Yup," Uldir said, his smile clearly forced. "Don't worry, we have Anakin Solo looking after us."
"And us Death Knights won't let anything happen to you guys either," Maika chimed in.
"[We historians aren't pushovers. We can fight,]" the teenage Jedi Knight Ohali Soroc commented in her native tongue. "[So don't count us out too.]"
The conversation halted when the team felt a tremor in the Force. The tremor died away almost as quickly as it had come, and the Jedi exchanged uneasy glances.
"Where are we right now?" Uldir looked to his apprentices.
Raxi looked around at the nearest landmarks, and to the vast pit of darkness below them. "Shopping district's lower wards. These were the cheap apartments and slums of the Old City. Last time Siare and I took a relief team through here, these buildings were home to nearly a hundred thousand refugees and other unfortunates."
"That's probably who our soldiers are facing up there," Tahiri gestured to the fighting occurring many levels above them.

The danger spiked again.
In a blur of motion, Maika and Toile kicked off the side of the building just before two giant pincer-like mandibles burst through the duracrete. The Death Knights swung back towards the owners of the pincers with their lightsabers activated. The pincer withdrew into the building, but Maika and Toile didn't stop, diving into the structure after their assailants.
Several more mandibles burst through the side of the building, one of which caught Siare's repelling line and sheared it in two.
"Siare!" Raxi yelled, letting go of the side of the building to dive after her friend. She managed to grab onto one of his hands with barely a second to spare. The sudden addition of his added weight, however, yanked on the piton holding Raxi's line in place, and also jerked Raxi's arm violently. The Zeltron bit down on her lip as her arm was dislocated. Ignoring the pain, she quickly swung her other hand down to grip Siare's wrist, suspended only by the high-tensile cable strapped to her utility belt. "Don't you dare let go and make me a liar, Siare!"
"Let go!"
"When Hutts diet!"
"No," Siare smiled faintly. He gestured with his free hand towards the abyssal gap below them. In the darkness of the undercity, there was no telling what was there. But evidently Siare's Force-enhanced echolocation could see something. "There's a small ledge a few meters down. I should be okay."
Raxi glared at him. "You sure?"
"Blind, not stupid," Siare quipped with a nod.
Raxi clenched her jaw and released Siare, who, after twisting his body slightly, plummeted out of sight.
In the meantime, more insectoid mouths continued to burst through the side of the building. Rather than risk being sliced off, the Jedi kicked off and used their return momentum to dive right through the new holes being made. It was then they finally got to see the rest of their attackers.
"You have got to be kidding me," Anakin groaned.
"*Grutchinya*?" Tahiri gaped at the giant, rock-eating insects. "What… how?"
"Vong-modified, now Killik controlled," Waxarn sighed, his saber humming as he squared off with two of the large locus-like beasts. The two Killik-controlled grutchinya began a lumbering charge towards their prey, their rock-crushing mandibles snapping repeatedly. Waxarn held out one hand and caught the creature in a Force-choke, while his

other hand flung his lightsaber at the other creature. "Still die all the same."
"I'm sure that's not standard curriculum," Anakin remarked, the air becoming arid and warm as a Force-fireball leapt from his hands and ignited another grutchinya.
"Neither is that," Waxarn commented.
"Hey! Mutual Admiration Society," Uldir yelled from a level below, his blaster bolts bouncing off of the grutchinyas' armored carapaces. "Can you do something to save the lives of your lovable guides?"
He was covering Raxi and a just-Force-jumped-up-from-his-ledge Siare, but his lack of lightsaber seemed to have emboldened the bug-controlled grutchinya to attack as a group. Trying to get to them was the team from Ossus, but they were pinned in by another half-dozen of the rock-eating bugs. It was plain to see that the conventional Jedi method of hacking with lightsabers and Force pushes, wasn't so effective on the Vong-raised giant locus-like creatures.
"On it!" Maika called back down. She held out her hand and a crackle of lightning danced between her fingers. She then directed the lightning into her purple lightsaber, which promptly began dancing with the blue energy. Timing it right, she leaped down to the lower level and landed on top of two of the grutchinya, a leg on the back of each. With a broad slash, her lightning infused saber promptly decapitated the two creatures. As the large bodies collapsed under their own weight, she flipped off the corpses to take up a protective stance in front of Uldir and the two others.
"[Show off,]" Toile shook his head. He held out his own hands and two of the creatures that had been menacing Uldir were lifted off the ground. Their legs thrashed about, but it was as if a vacuum had developed in the center of their torso, and their thoraxes promptly caved in.
The remaining grutchinya tried to retreat back into the shadows, but both Toile and Maika grasped each other's hands and stretched the other outward. The Force surged through the abandoned building, rippling up and down in a silent pressure wave. For a fraction of a second, Toile and Maika's faces twisted into ones of pure hatred and anger, and then the next fraction became emotionless. Another fraction of a second later, the hearts of the six creatures stopped beating and the grutchniya toppled over where they were.
When silence once again reigned, a wide-eyed Jedi Initiate Hedda, who had been taking cover by Tahiri, stared in disbelief. "That…that…isn't that the dark side?"
"Big time," Raxi blinked, in fearful awe of the two young Death Knights.

Even the Ossus Jedi looked apprehensive at what they had just seen. After all, it wasn't every day you saw Jedi Masters and Jedi Knights kill with the Force.
Waxarn and Anakin exchanged ever suffering glances. "You explain it, Solo."
"I didn't teach those two to do…*that*."
"In a way, you did."
"Huh?"
"Did you really think no one would take your holocron seriously?"
"I guess," Anakin tilted his head curiously. "I know my uncle would be against it. Master Durron, Katarn, Lobi, and Master Horn too. I would have thought they'd lock up the holocron and not let anyone see it."
"That would have made that knowledge even more sought after. Many people in the Order wondered why you decided to stay on Zonama Sekot when there were so many problems left after the war. They never really bought the 'helping the Vong rebuild' story. When they couldn't go to you, and with your brother on his pilgrimage, they went to the next best thing; your thoughts preserved in that holocron. So many Jedi were looking for direction, and they fell back into their nerf mentality because they couldn't find answers of their own."
"And you?"
"The Jedi way of dealing with things doomed my first group of Death Knights, I needed to try something new. And as much as I disagree with your recklessness, your arguments about the Force made sense, especially after the events on Kalee. Rather than bottle that grief and rage up, rather than let it fester like an open wound or use it like a weapon, I followed your advice. The Force became a tool, our emotions the power that drives it. Maika and Toile use their fear and anger and hatred and all of their negativity to protect, to shelter. They use their feelings for good, and that's all that should matter."
"Time has definitely changed us," Anakin murmured.
"Truly. But you're still explaining the finer details of the Force to those Denon kids. Better they hear it from the guy who originally preached it."
"On the bright side, the bug jammer is working," Tahiri stepped in, rolling her eyes and patting both Waxarn and Anakin on the shoulder. "We didn't get swarmed after the grutchinya beat feet, so we should be okay." She looked over her shoulder and winked at the younger Jedi. "Pay no attention to these two dummies. For the Force, just do what feels right. Light side, dark side, you can follow it if you think that's the path you want to walk. Or not. There's no one way to be a Jedi, so don't worry about the little things."

"Little things," Uldir muttered, shaking his head. "It was those little things that became big things that started all the Force mess in the first place."
"Master Tionne did say the mission with you guys would be thought-provoking," Master Zuma said wryly. "I should have wondered when she gave me that pitying look when I signed up to be on this squad."
"New times, Master Zuma," Maika bowed politely. "Calls for new methods. But at heart, Toile and I are still Jedi. That's all that matters, right?"
"As Master Lochett indicated, history would give you a half dozen examples otherwise," Mander answered evenly. "But like Tionne, it is not in my place to judge. We historians are simply chroniclers of what happens, gatherers of evidence. Maybe, one day in the future, Jedi will look back at these times and wonder why the rest of the Order wasn't doing as you did. Maybe, one day, those same Jedi might look back and condemn you for teaching these methods, hard to say."
"[You disagree with our methods?]" Toile asked.
"I disagree with the ease at which you kill. At how quickly you rely on the Force to end the life of another," Mander replied smoothly. "The minute the Jedi see things as 'us or them' as 'black or white,' then they will have started down a well worn path filled with names familiar to many. Ulic Qel-Droma, Exar Kun, Anakin Skywalker, Brakiss. They all thought themselves as better than the rest of the Jedi for being able to wield the dark side. In the end, it was that confidence that doomed them. I do not judge any of you, but it is my duty to remind you of the past. Otherwise we will be doomed to repeat it."
"[What our master said,]" Ohali Soroc added with Loli at her side. They walked past the others, clipping their lightsabers back onto their belts.
"[You guys can do whatever Force things you want to; just leave me out of it. You might think it's great to kill with the Force, but to me the Force is a living creature, and making it kill someone just isn't right.]"
"As the delegation that cares the least about the Force since we can barely use it, can we go back to hunting big bug and ugly now?" Siare cut in. "The ledge I dropped down to connects to a set of pipes. Those pipes, I think, goes to the ancient sewers. At least, that's where all the other pipes went when Raxi and I explored this part of the undercity."
"Is it stable?" Mander Zuma asked, accepting the change in topic. "It *has* been several millennia since anyone actually used those pipes for what they were meant to be used for. And we're about to use them in a way they *weren't* meant for."
"Stable as three-thousand year old duracrete pipes can be," Siare shrugged. He leaned over the side of the building and clicked his

tongue. After a moment, he pulled himself back up. "Some fractures, but not enough to damage its integrity. We should be lucky the Vong bugs didn't eat it."
"Well the Force is telling me we should continue on," Uldir said almost sarcastically. "The alternative is staying here and waiting for more bugs."
"You do realize we're heading into a sewer system, Master Lochett," Hedda sighed, shaking her head.
"What does that have to do with anything?"
"Don't you play those new hologames?" Loli, the Pantoran apprentice, piped up, grinning at Hedda. "You always have to save your game before entering the sewers because there's *always* mean and nasty creatures in there. On the third level of Forces of Darkness, we have to fight dianogas and sewer serpents while searching for a warlord. And in Paladin of the Ancient Order, you and your Twi'lek friend have to get past this giant Rancor that somehow grew up in the sewer system. So chances are we'll meet some boss bug, like in the game…
"When do you have time to play all those games?" Uldir blinked. "Do the Ossus teachers not have enough for you to do?"
Loli blinked. "So I take it you don't game?"
"No. Given the way the galaxy is, why do you?"
"It's the only way I can make evil, sithy decisions and not screw up someone's life for real," Loli smiled faintly. "I always do the 'light side' playthrough first, probably a guilt complex or something. We Pantorans don't exactly like conflict."
"How does the real life experience compare?" Siare asked dryly.
Loli's brave expression faltered slightly. "Let's just say I prefer my hologames. You can always reload if something doesn't go your way."
Overhearing the conversation, Anakin cast a questioning look to Master Zuma. Her young age aside, Loli didn't appear to be 'field' material.
While Uldir took some of the younger Jedi down the steeply angled pipe, Anakin held out a hand to stop the older Jedi Master.
The middle-aged man, however, shook his head silently and waited until they were the only two at the top of the pipe. "You'll see why I brought her along, Jedi Solo. Not all warriors need to carry lightsabers."
"But lightsabers definitely help." Anakin commented, gesturing back to the dead grutchinya.
"Not always. The Order has changed much since you were last a part of it. Partly thanks to you, the curriculum each of the apprentices is un-uniformed. What my apprentice Ohali Soroc can do, has learned, is different than that of Loli. And what they have learned of the Force is different than what my master taught me. In order to be a historian, I

was taught to see the Force as others see it; to learn why they do as they do."
"And how do I see it, Master Zuma?" Anakin asked curiously.
Master Zuma arched a single eyebrow. "In the short time that I've known and watched you, you see the Force as beneath your respect."
"I respect it."
"You respect it as much as one would respect a hydrospanner or blaster. You find it useful, bend it to suit your needs. You find the arguments about its philosophies foolish, can't comprehend why others can't see it as you do. Though you believe you see the Force in its entirety, the light and the dark, you are blind in many ways, Anakin Solo. That is why Master Tionne assigned me to your squad. She did not say it, and though she wants you to succeed, she fears that your tale will be a warning for future generations of those who call themselves Jedi."
"A warning?"
"Of what happens to a Jedi when he, or she, doesn't even realize they are a Jedi no longer," the older Jedi replied evenly. "And what happens to those around said Jedi when they themselves don't realize this. There's a reason why the older Jedi are wary of your cavalier attitude towards the Force. Remove your own opinions and feelings of the matter and try to see it as they do."
"Enlighten me."
"That is not my job. You do not need another's view regurgitated to you. A true Jedi enlightens one's self and does not have another fill in the blanks for them. That is why, in many ways, you will always be an inferior Jedi to your brother. He seeks answers, you always assume those answers will come to you. " In conclusion, Master Zuma inclined his head in a slight bow and then started for the pipe. Just as he ducked his head in, he paused and looked back to Anakin. "There is a bright side in all this. When the answers your brother finds are not to his liking, he blames others. When the wrong answers come to you, you blame only yourself."
"How is that a bright side?" Anakin asked with a slight frown.
"*You* know where to begin your search for answers. Where the problem lies. He does not, and if he doesn't find his way, he *will* be lost." With that, Mander Zuma dropped down into the pipe and hurried to catch up with the others.
Anakin paused where he was, his slight frown not disappearing. As much as he respected the older Jedi in the Order, it was hard *not* to develop a 'us versus them' mentality. When he had left to live on Zonama after the war, he had been under a cloud of scrutiny by his

aunt and uncle, by Corran, Kyp, Kyle, and pretty much anyone with the title 'master' in front of their name.
The masters had also fought in the war, sure. But by following their scruples, following Grandmaster Luke Skywalker's judgment and views of the Force, they waited two and a half years before deciding to fight. So afraid of one side of the Force, they were willing to blind themselves to it. Jedi by the dozen died from the inaction, systems fell, the government pleaded for help, but still the Jedi did nothing. It wasn't the 'Jedi way' to go to war. It was only after Anakin had taken that team to Myrkr, had nearly died, had caused the deaths of a half dozen Jedi his age and the capture of his own brother, did the Jedi Order decide to actively fight in the war. Two and a half years later.
What rankled Anakin the most at the time was that his own brother, as wise as Jacen was, had also adopted their uncle's 'war leads to the dark side' camp. Regardless of what was happening in the rest of the galaxy, regardless of Centerpoint, of Sernpidal and Ithor.
The times were changing, but the Order wasn't.
And the same Masters who wanted to sit and wait for the war to blow over were still in positions of great influence in the Order. Still teaching that one half of the Force was to be feared, to be wary of and ignored at all costs.
But if the only ones who decided that his Force philosophies were worth anything at all were now teenage angst-filled outcasts of the Order, what did that say about him?
With a frustrated grimace, Anakin dropped down onto the lower ledge and began following the others. Moralizing could come later. Right now he had a ghost from his past to find, a ghost Anakin wasn't exactly feeling eager to meet.
(-==-(III)-==-)
"This isn't like any sewers I have ever seen," Loli whispered, her pale blue face illuminated by the glow of her equally blue lightsaber. She looked absolutely tiny in the massive diameter of the pipe they were walking through.
"[It's almost like the walls calcified into stone,]" Ohali murmured. Both teens were careful to keep their voice low. They had yet to encounter any Killiks, but it never hurt to be safe.
"Remember, these pipes once served several million people," Mander Zuma said softly. "It was built to last."
Aided by the glow of their lightsabers, the group had trekked through several kilometers of the ancient sewer system without incident. Despite Loli's prediction of bad guys around every corner, the Killiks were conspicuously absent.

With the tunnels being wide enough for even the *Millennium Falcon* to fly through, the trek was a desolate and somewhat unnerving one. They had come across a few partially collapsed passage ways, yawning chasms that disappeared into who knew where, and service rooms long abandoned to time.
"Look, up ahead!" Hedda gasped.
The group turned their attention to the direction the teen was pointing. A strange purple glow appeared to be emanating from around the next corner. But more than that, the group could also hear the telltale clicks of insect mandibles reverberate off the curved walls of the sewers. In the purple glow, they could see the silhouettes of several bipedal insects against the pipe's surface.
The Jedi reflexively tightened their holds on their weapons.
"Raynar is near," Anakin murmured.
"Let me guess, in that direction," Waxarn gestured with his head.
"Yeah."
"I am worried about something," Tahiri spoke up.
"Huh?"
"If the nest is nearby, shouldn't we have run into something by now?"
"Like what?" Uldir voiced.
Tahiri shrugged. "A guard, or patrol."
"They're giant bugs, do they need to patrol?" Siare tilted his head.
The group ventured closer. As they rounded the corner they noticed the source of the purple light. Clusters of oval-shaped objects attached to the wall and floor were pulsating with a purple-white glow. They were spread out in regular intervals, seemingly continuing onwards indefinitely down the kilometers of piping before them. Interspersed between these clusters were mounds of dirt the height of a person, likewise attached to the walls of the pipes like barnacles. Killik larva inched their way across the bone-strewn floor, some munching on the left-overs of whatever unfortunate creature had become bug-chow.
"[Errr…do we attack them?]" Ohali said nervously. Her eyes were rooted to a larva that was gnawing on a Duros skull.
"I don't feel any aggression," Anakin shook his head. "Unless we threaten them, I don't think we'll have any trouble. Tahiri, can you put the bug-jammer to sleep. I don't want any miscommunication."
"Anakin," Tahiri said in a low voice, her eyes rooted to the larva even as she absently stroked the Vong-made bug-jammer to slumber.
"Tahiri?"
"Reach out to them with the Force," she gestured with her head. "What do you feel?"

Anakin did as he was told, then paused, his eyes flying open in surprise. "These larva are Force sensitive."
"Not just the larva, but so are the bugs in the eggs," Maika whispered in shock, a hand resting on a purple shell.
"A new breed of bugs," Waxarn breathed. "There's no way we'll stand a chance if they're allowed to grow into warriors."
"They're just babies," Raxi protested, kneeling by one of the larva and petting it. It made a cooing, clicking sound and inched onwards. "And the creatures in the eggs haven't done anything."
"[Yet.]" Toile backed up his master. "[They'll grow, become big bugs, and with the Force, will cause suffering on a never before seen scale.]"
"The current Killiks we're fighting are only receptive to the Force, but these will actually use it," Siare added his own opinion. "And if what I'm seeing is right, there are thousands of these eggs up and down this pipeway. I don't know about you, but one bug with the Force is scary enough, I don't want to have to face a whole army of them several years down the line."
"They're all drones," Mander Zuma murmured. He watched a developed Killik tend to a cluster of eggs, smearing them with a resin of sorts. The egg-tenders ignored the group of Jedi completely, engrossed in their task with all their focus. "Yet, they are also sentient. Their thoughts are what gives the Killik hive mind its personality. Loli, what do you sense?"
All eyes turned to the Pantoran apprentice, who swallowed nervously in turn. "I'll do my best, master."
As Loli sat cross-legged on the ground and immersed herself in the Force, questioning glances were sent to her master. Mander answered in an even voice. "Loli is capable of seeing a person's true nature, no matter how disguised or hidden. Their past, what makes them who they are, they are all an open holobook for her to read."
"I've never heard of an ability like that before," Anakin blinked.
"There is probably much of the Force still unknown to many of us," Mander replied patiently. "Loli?"
"I sense…hunger," Loli frowned, her hands tightening into fists in her lap. "Lust for blood. But it's not theirs. Like an imprint. They're blank slates. No evil or good in their intentions. They just do because that is what they were born to. To grow and protect the hive, to become useful to the hive. The minders were born to protect the eggs, nothing more. They too want their hive to thrive, to fulfill its purpose."
"And what purpose is that?" Mander said kindly.

Loli shook her head. "These ones don't know. They're like individual cells in a bigger creature. They have their purpose and that is all they know."
"Then we should continue on then," Uldir glanced down the glowing passageway. "Find Raynar or someone who does know."
"But what about these eggs and Force-sensitive bugs?" Waxarn spoke up. "We spare them, we're in a great deal of trouble. You heard Apprentice Loli, their entire purpose is to help the rest of the Killiks destroy everything."
Almost as if called, a Killik twice the size of the ones tending the eggs emerged out of a burrow nearby on all fours. The moment it did, Loli let out a horrified gasp.
"Master! Explosives on the supportive beacons! The city's rigged to blow!"
The massive Killik took one look at the Jedi, then straightened to an even taller height. It drew a giant bone staff taller than Anakin and began spinning it.
"That one doesn't look to friendly," Hedda shrunk back.
A burrow attached to the ceiling opened up and deposited a second giant Killik. Two others emerged, each chittering angrily at the intruders.
Mander quickly pulled his apprentice to her feet as the group backed up.
"Ideas?" Waxarn grunted.
Anakin stepped forward, lightsaber clipped to his belt, holding his hands out. "We didn't come here to fight."
The giant bugs continued to approach, spinning their staff weapons.
Anakin looked over his shoulder. "Deactivate your lightsabers." Once the sabers were turned off, he looked back to the lead bug, who had yet to slow its approach. "We just want to speak with Raynar. No fighting is needed."
The lead bug stopped in front of Anakin and a nervous tension filled the air. The bug was standing stalk still, its compound eyes boring into the smaller individual before it. The Jedi shifted uncomfortably, the bug remained where it was, completely silent. The other large Killiks stopped behind the lead bug in a single, imposing line.
"Can you take us to Raynar?" Anakin tried.
The lead bug raised his staff-weapon, but the Jedi could sense no aggression, no desire to attack, and kept their lightsabers unlit. Which was why, when it swung at Anakin, the attack was completely unexpected. Fortunately, the weapon cut through thin air.

Acting on sheer instinct from her left-over Yuuzhan Vong side, Tahiri had knocked Anakin down at the last possible second.
"Dummy! Until you can talk bug, stop taking stupid risks. Our kids still need their dad," Tahiri hissed, rolling around and throwing her lightsaber at the same time. The bright white blade of her mother's saber embedded itself in the torso of the offending Killik, but didn't seem to stop the monstrosity. Tahiri made another gesture and her saber flew upwards, bisecting the upper half of the bug. The saber flew back into her hand, and both she and Anakin rolled out of the way as the remaining three giant bugs stabbed their staffs into the floor.
Tahiri reactivated the bug-jammer, blocking off the telepathic link of the bugs in the immediate vicinity. The bugs didn't exactly appreciate it. The larva let out angry howls, which seemed to be laced with malevolent Force energy, and charged right along with the giant Killik protectors.
"A little help here!" Anakin yelped, continuing to roll back and forth.
"You're the one who tried to talk with a giant murderous bug," Waxarn retorted, using the Force to send the giant bug flying back into its companions. This gave Tahiri and Anakin enough time to get back to their feet and stagger backwards.
"It's a hive mind. Raynar has to be in there somewhere," Anakin panted. "I think that's why they didn't attack at first."
"You 'think'?" Waxarn said dryly.
The cavernous sewer pipe suddenly became a flurry of activity as Killik drones and other co-opted insects began spilling out of the burrows that lined the pathway.
"Should we pull back?" Uldir called out, his blasters blazing once more.
"Raynar's at the other end of this path," Anakin yelled, shaking his head in negative.
"Great, so slogging our way through an army of bad guys, just like you predicted Loli," Mander Zuma groaned.
"Can we just reload Jedi Solo's conversation with the bug and choose a different option?" Loli squeaked, ducking as a Killik-controlled razor bug nearly decapitated her. Fortunately, she had held up her lightsaber on reflex and the bug incinerated itself against the glowing blade.
"Because I'm really not like things at the moment."
"[Real life, Loli,]" Ohali remarked, her orange eyes quickly tracking five drones that were trying to surround her and Loli.
"Stang," Loli grumped. Her lightsaber twisted in an arc and batted aside a Killik staff-weapon.
The Killiks continued to push forward in a single mass, stepping over the corpses of the ones cut down without care. Slowly and steadily, the

Jedi were being pushed back. There were just too many bugs and not enough Jedi.
"Enough of this! Toile, Maika, we don't have time to play around," Waxarn grumbled. "Toile with me, Maika, the shatter point on the ceiling."
Waxarn took a step back, then stomped on the ground with Force-assisted authority, the duracrete beneath his feet cracked into several large chunks. With a gesture, he lifted two of the larger chunks and sent it flying into the ranks of the Killiks. The duracrete projectiles exploded as if they were grenades, mowing down whole swaths of bugs at a time. The Jedi Master repeated the stomp and hand gesture, advancing forwards with the very ground becoming his weapon.
Following his master's lead, Toile likewise used the Force to free parts of the duracrete piping. Another gesture sent these person-sized debris into the thickest part of the enemy formation. The Killik pressed forward despite the boulder-sized rocks being flung at them, but the two Death Knights continued the onslaught.
Maika, in the meantime, had let the Force surge around her, her eyes a mask of concentration and directed towards the ceiling. She hurled her lightsaber as if it were a stick of explosives into the ceiling high above, and the glowing blade gouged a streak across the aged duracrete. Her saber flew back into her hand and she deactivated it and clipped it to her belt. Brushing a lock of hair out of her eyes she held up both hands towards the ceiling. With a yell, Maika made a downward yanking motion with her hands. A good-sized section of the ceiling caved in, pouring rocks and other debris down into the pipe in a thunderous roar. The brief avalanche buried the front ranks of the Killiks, and temporarily halted the Killik's advance.
Ordinarily, that would have been it. However, the Killiks had been burrowing through the area for the past several years, weakening not only the structure of the pipe but the ground above it as well. Added to that was the brittleness of a millennia-old pipe, already brimming with many age-induced cracks and fractures, that hadn't been serviced in a very long time. Only a split second after Maika had brought down that small little part of the ceiling, a much louder breaking sound boomed overhead. In a chain-reaction., the adjacent portions of the millennia-old pipe gave way. Spidery cracks branched out across the duracrete as if a fault line had developed, and parts of undercity buildings came crashing down on top of the insect army.
After the sound of combat and the incessant clacking of mandibles, the silence that followed was almost eerie.

The three Death Knights panted, smiling wanly at the devastation before them. All the bugs, the eggs, and everything else that had been in front of the Jedi was now buried under several meters of debris. Needless to say the ancient sewer line now had a new floor several meters higher than before.
"Glad you're on our side," Uldir remarked, watching the dust settle.
"So much for the Force sensitive baby bugs," Raxi sighed, spying the squished remains of a Killik larva.
But the group didn't have long to relax.
"Come on!" Loli yelled, already scrambling over the debris.
"What is it?" Mander hurried to catch up.
"The bugs planted explosives on the supporting beams of the undercity," Loli panted. "We have to convince Raynar not to blow them!"
"Good a reason as any to hurry," Mander nodded.
The group hastily bounded and tackled the jagged, kilometer-long field of debris as they continued to follow what was left of the sewer line.
"We're heading to one of the central service chambers," Raxi voiced, keeping up with the others.
"Tell us more," Uldir gestured.
"Think of a massive cistern," Raxi made a circular motion with her arms. "The ones Siare and our friends explored were generally six levels from top to bottom. Chemical treatments, mineral separation, all manner of sewer-y things went on in there. From what we could tell, they served entire districts and often had one pipe that connected to a neighboring chamber."
"[Master, the Force is strong in the area ahead.]" Toile whispered off to the side.
"What do you want to bet that the pipe we just came through wasn't the only one full of Force-sensitive bug eggs?" Waxarn grumbled.
"I wonder why now," Maika added to the discussion between the Death Knights. "Why after five years of making a mess in the galaxy the Killiks are finally growing Force-sensitive bug warriors."
"[I want to know *how*, it is possible,]" Toile replied. "[Even if two Jedi do have a child, there's still a chance he or she won't be Force-sensitive. How can these Killiks raise whole batches of bugs sensitive to the Force to begin with?]"
"We can ask Raynar," Waxarn shook his head. "In any case, prepare for the worst. If things go sour, we're the ones that will be holding the door open so the others can escape."
In a conversation of their own, Tahiri gently nudged her husband with her hip. "Thinking too loud, Hero Boy."

"I have my shields up," Anakin muttered. "Not my fault they don't work on you."
"You're thinking about what will happen if we can't talk Raynar down."
"Yeah."
"The historical reports all say that a Joiner completely loses their individual self to the hive they're Joined to after five years." Tahiri continued to voice his thoughts. "Even if Raynar is a Jedi, it's unlikely that he'll have lasted that long."
"Then what? If he doesn't back down, I kill him?" Anakin glanced at his wife pleadingly. "Actually kill him this time. I failed him on Myrkr, Tahiri. Him, Ulaha, Eryl…"
"Anakin, repeating those names over and over again isn't going to change anything," Tahiri muttered. "Yes, the mission was recklessly stupid and you nearly got *us* killed in the process. But at the end of it, you delayed the creation of voxyn until they didn't matter. For the first time in the war, you allowed the Jedi to go into battle without fear. We loss some people in the process, but it was a war we didn't even know we could win. Think about it, if you failed to save me on Yavin all those years ago. If I got turned into some type of Shaped Jedi that Mezhan intended me to become and returned to the galaxy now to go on a killing spree, what would you do?"
"I don't love Raynar," Anakin said dryly. "There's a great deal of difference. Besides, if I failed to save you on Yavin, I probably would have tried to hunt you down wherever the Vong took you. Even then you were my best friend. Also at the time, I knew you were alive. For all this time I thought Raynar was dead."
"Maybe he's already dead," Tahiri whispered tenderly. "And it's just the bugs controlling his body. Would the Raynar you remember ever do what he's doing today? Would he kill civilians, throw the galaxy into chaos, and for what? The High Council might want to save Raynar, maybe if only to put him on trial, but that would make a mockery of the Raynar your brother and sister befriended. I know that if I were shaped back then, I would want you to end it before I hurt you."
Anakin looked away, his face pained. "I just…I feel like I owe it to Raynar to try *something*."
"But if you have to?" Tahiri asked.
"If it comes down to it, it's his life over the millions in the city above," Anakin breathed. He then glanced over his shoulder towards the Ossus portion of the group. "Jedi Apprentice Loli."
"Yes, Anakin sir!" The Pantoran teen snapped off a passable salute.
Anakin smiled despite himself. "If you use your abilities on Raynar, do you think you can tell me if he's still…well…him?"

"Should be able to," Loli's head bobbed in affirmative. "Before Master Zuma took this mission, he and the GA intel people had me look at several Joiners they captured. I have a good idea of what to look for. Only problem is, is that I don't know Raynar. Won't be able to tell him apart from the rest of the bugs in the Killik meld."
"Through the Jedi bond we're sharing, do you think you can pluck out what he used to feel like?"
Loli blinked her yellow-green eyes slowly, then nodded again. "That'd work."
"Great, so when we see him, let me know what you sense," Anakin said supportively.
"Will it make a difference in the long run?" Loli's master spoke up gently. "Will knowing if Raynar still lives within that shell of his make your decision any easier?"
"No," Anakin said simply. "But it'll let me know if I'm about to end the life of a friend, or if that friend died a long time ago."
Hearing that, Uldir joined the conversation. "It doesn't have to be like that, Anakin. Tahiri's bug-jammer should keep him from extending his will out to the other Killiks he's with via pheromones or electrical signals. And you can use the Myrkr meld to keep him from sending his will out through the Force. We have the anti-Joiner darts with us. If he doesn't cooperate, we hit him and take him with us."
"And if he has some sort of contingency plan in place?" Anakin asked. "He has the city rigged to blow. All it takes is a single order, a surge of the Force, and the message will be sent through the Killik hive mind at the speed of thought. Can I really gamble all those millions above us just to save his life? Do I have any right to? If Loli tells me there's nothing left of Raynar, then the choice is obvious."
"And if some part of him still exists?" Uldir said.
Anakin's gaze became distant. "I'll cross that bridge when I get to it."
The group slowed as they reached a narrow catwalk and the continuation of the rest of the sewer pipe. Across the catwalk, from the glows of their lightsabers, they could see that the chamber opened up into the large circular room that Raxi had predicted. And inside that room, they could sense…
"Raynar is in there." Anakin said in a low voice.
"Let's not keep him waiting then," Waxarn took a step forward.
Anakin, however, held out an arm. "Waxarn. If it comes down to it, let me be the one. I was the one who took him to Myrkr. I'm responsible for whatever happened to him ."
"If you're sure, Solo."

The group stepped onto the rusted metal catwalk and entered the room. The clicking sound of insect mandibles echoed in the enclosed chamber from all around, but the Killiks remained out of sight of the glow of the lightsabers. The Jedi moved back to back, trying to make the glow of their sabers cast the widest arc possible. They could feel the danger all around them, feel the Killiks' desire to attack, to feed. And given that everywhere else was pitch black, and they were on the middle of five levels, that was not exactly a fun feeling to be sensing. They advanced forward, coming to a stop on a rounded central platform in the middle of the room.

"There he is," Tahiri whispered in a hushed voice, her green eyes focused at the opposite edge of the platform.

At the edge of the illumination, the Jedi could just make out a lone figure in ragged robes sitting with his hands folded in his lap. Hooded and slightly hunched over, it was hard to tell who he was. At first the figure appeared humanoid. But as the group edged closer they could see that that wasn't entirely the case. Almost as if grafted to the figure's spine, six spiny bug legs extended outwards. The skin of the figure's exposed hands was gray and flaky, and one whole human leg appeared to be augmented with bits and pieces of some type of chitinous material.

"Anakin Solo." The figure's voice was raspy, hoarse.

"Raynar Thul," Anakin's own voice was but a whisper as he stared at a specter from his past in the flesh.

"Not Raynar any longer," the figure didn't move, barely appeared to be breathing. "We are PrimeUnu, UnuThul. We speak for Unu and the Kind."

"So Raynar has been completely Joined then?"

"It was his choice," the figure replied. "When the Kind found him he was scared, in pain, dying. We made him whole again. We gave him a place where he would not have to be scared. He and the beings that once were Lomi and Welk, they all made the choice. And it is thanks to them that memories within the Kind have resurfaced."

"From what I could gather, you want to stop some sort of evil from awakening," Anakin said carefully, relying on the reports Zekk and the others had gathered. "Do those memories have to do with this evil?"

"Everything," UnuThul answered. "Raynar and Lomi and Welk's Joining introduced to the Kind what you believe are two sides of the Force. Raynar as a Jedi, Lomi and Welk as dark Jedi. Balance. We understood then what needed to be done."

"And killing all these people, causing all this death and destruction over the years?"

"Are what is needed to maintain balance. Raynar agreed when the Kind tested the idea with him. Lomi and Welk agreed. The Kind was in agreement. What you call the light side of the Force became too strong, darkness was needed to balance it before the damage caused by the light became too great."
"I don't believe that Raynar would willingly kill innocents," Anakin argued. "He is a Jedi."
"It does not matter what you believe, Anakin Solo. Unless, of course, you wish to Join with us. Or would you abandon us to an impossible task once more, leave Raynar to suffer for the decisions you made so long ago?"
"Anakin," Tahiri said anxiously, fully sensing the thoughts going through her husband's head.
"I know," Anakin sighed softly. He glanced down to the Pantoran apprentice at his side. "Loli?"
Loli looked up at Anakin, eyes apologetic. "He's still in there, Jedi Solo. I can see him, curled up like an infant, wishing the galaxy away. But he's faint, barely there."
Trying a different tactic, Anakin looked back to the kneeling figure. "Why do you have Denon rigged to blow? Is that part of balancing the Force?"
"Yes."
"So the millions of lives that will die?"
"Will die anyways if the Great Darkness awakens."
"Then why kill them now?"
"There is a chance their deaths will appease *Her* and keep her slumbering."
"A chance? Is it a big chance, a small one? Millions have already died this past decade, trillions more are suffering. You seek balance, but aren't you making the galaxy just bit *too* dark?"
"We are seeking the equilibrium in the Force. Once the scales are brought closer to balance, the galaxy will right itself."
Anakin replied by firing several anti-Joiner darts into the seated figure. However, the Jedi all felt a surge of Force energy neutralize the drugs within the dart. Waxarn tried to fire a second dose, but this time Raynar waved a hand and batted the darts aside.
"There goes that plan," Uldir muttered under his breath.
Raynar shifted, but didn't seem bothered by the attempt to subdue him. "It is pointless. Their deaths have been decided. We have…"
"Stop it!" Hedda interrupted, stepping forward past Tahiri and Anakin. Her face was a mask of pain and anger. "Haven't you already done enough? We got the message, something bad is coming. Now let us

prepare for it, her, whatever! We can't fight it if you leave this galaxy a wreck. And think about everyone else that's hurting because of your actions. I would have understood if you targeted the soldiers and politicians. But it's the refugees, the poor, the ones already suffering the most that are getting the brunt of everything! This galaxy is already a miserable place, it doesn't need you bug-people screwing it up any more than it is! So just stop it! Okay?"

UnuThul was silent for a moment, then slowly rose from his seated position. His robe fell away revealing a hideously disfigured and scarred face. It was almost as if half of it had been melted away. His right eye had been replaced by a compound eye, his right ear little more than a hole in the side of his head. As the ragged cloth that covered him fell to the ground, it became clear then that the chitinous material on his arms extended over parts of his chest and stomach. The bug legs attached to his back unfurled outwards as well, each with wicked looking black talons at the ends.

Hedda quickly backed up behind Anakin and Tahiri once more, her eyes wide and fearful. But Raynar made no aggressive move. There was another pull of the Force that the Jedi couldn't stop, and everyone knew that an order had just been given to the Killik hive-mind.

"To show that we do not wish to fight you, in ten minutes we will give the order to detonate all the explosives," UnuThul intoned, mismatched eyes locking onto Anakin. "The blast will also bury this chamber. We suggest you use the time to retreat to a safe location."

"You heard her, Raynar, she told you to stop it," Anakin said sharply. "If they live, a threat the galaxy has not seen in many millennia will send the galaxy into oblivion."

"Raynar," Anakin opened up the Myrkr bond once more. Through it, he could sense Raynar's will being injected into the Killik hive-mind. He realized that what was left of Raynar had just exerted a small amount of will to give them that time limit. Maybe all Raynar needed was more time. Could he buy them all enough? If Raynar had truly wanted to detonate the explosives, a time limit was pointless.

At the same time, however, if Raynar couldn't take over the hive-mind, was too far gone, then he had to be stopped. This UnuThul was using the Killiks to carry out a twisted interpretation of Jedi logic, was willing to bury them all if he had to. All it took was a single though, all it took was for the last of Raynar's personality to vanish and everyone was doomed.

"The Kind will not listen to you, Anakin Solo. We are in agreement about what must be done."

"Come on! You're a Jedi! Mass murder isn't you. Loli says you're in there, so listen to me. I'm sorry I left you all those years ago. If I could go back and change things I could, but the past is just that, the past. Back then, I tried to save as many Jedi as I could, and I apologize that you weren't one of them. But let me save you now. Tell the bugs to deactivate the explosives. To stand down. Hedda's right. So many people, Killiks and the others of this galaxy, have already died. We can fight this threat."
"Raynar exists no longer," UnuThul blinked, sounding annoyed. He frowned, twitching his head slightly before continuing. "You now have eight minutes before the explosives detonate. Those of Unu and the other nests will prevent any Galactic Alliance forces from reaching the explosives in time."
Anakin released a low breath. "Raynar, if you do this, you'll regret it. Remember who you are, what you believed in."
"We believe we are a Jedi, willing to die to do what must be done," UnuThul said calmly. "If the Force wills it, then the millions will die. We do as the PrimeUnu wishes, the PrimeUnu will sacrifice many of the Kind but a sacrifice is what is needed."
Anakin raised an eyebrow. "So if UnuThul dies, the Kind won't carry out his will anymore?"
"Raynar is dead. But his will lives on in the Kind as UnuThul's will." UnuThul held out a human hand and a lightsaber flew into it. Several figures leaped out of the shadows, and soon UnuThul was joined by several dozen Killik warriors. They formed up into two rows, and the front row held out their hands. To the alarm of the Jedi, lightning materialized in small balls and began crackling menacingly.
"But if you attack us, we will defend ourselves, Anakin Solo. You have six minutes left."
Anakin felt his heart thump loudly in his chest. This was it, he was out of options. He could feel that small strand that was Raynar begin slipping, and with that his throat tightened.
Gripping his lightsaber in his hand, Anakin slowly shook his head. He could feel support surge through to him from the meld, but it wasn't enough. Raynar was still in there, but Anakin just couldn't reach him. Didn't have the time to.
The only way to save everyone on the surface, to disable the explosives, was to neutralize Raynar.
There was only one thing he could do now, regardless of how he wished it wasn't so.
He made the decision, the Force coursing through him.

"Raynar!" Anakin yelled, vaulting over the ranks of the Killiks in the blink of an eye.
Raynar's gold-bladed lightsaber flared to life and met Anakin's violet blade in a violent hiss. The lights of the sabers highlighted the contrasting expressions on both faces. Anakin's eyes were hardened in determination, but those who knew him well could also see desperation and pain crease the corners of his eyes. Raynar's misshapen and disfigured face betrayed no emotion at all, as if he was simply an automaton following the program he was given.
As purple and gold flashed in a rapid flurry, the Killiks all hurried to face the threat; the hive mind temporarily forgetting that Anakin wasn't the only Jedi there. The Death Knights dove into the Force-sensitive Killiks mercilessly, cutting down what they perceived to be the biggest threat without hesitation. Several of the Killiks turned and fired off their balls of lightning or concussive blasts of Force energy, but the Death Knights flipped, rolled, and evaded each attack with skill. While most Jedi may be trained to protect, the Death Knights were trained to kill.
The other Jedi weren't idle either, quickly rushing to keep the rest of the bugs off of Anakin. Sprinting, Tahiri had picked up one of the fallen Killik staff-weapons and was using it as if it were an amphistaff, slicing and dicing in tandem with her saber. The Ossus Jedi were bunched together, pooling their Force abilities to release waves of Force energy, or to negate incoming balls of Killik-thrown kinetic and lightning blasts. Even the Denon Jedi were active. The darkness wasn't hindering Siare's ability to fight one bit. In fact, he had reverted to using a pair of vibroblades, streaking through the darkness and stabbing unsuspecting Killiks who had been focused on the glowing lightsaber blades.
And as the two sides fought, the battle between Anakin and UnuThul was reaching its peak.
UnuThul was now using his bug limbs to aid in his attack, thrusting them outwards at speeds that nearly broke the sound barrier. Though it made things difficult for Anakin, the Jedi had already severed three of the legs and was working on his fourth. The fight was fast, quick. Sabers repeatedly flashing in the darkened chamber.
While Anakin had had time to hone his combat abilities, perfect his saber techniques and try new methods, Raynar hadn't fought a lightsaber battle since his academy days. And even then, Raynar was far from the best swordsman. The Killiks also weren't used to combating Jedi and the hive mind could offer no assistance in that endeavor. This meant that UnuThul was reacting more on instinct,

being forced to respond to Anakin's aggressive advance. And as Anakin had proved in his years during the Yuuzhan Vong War, his moves always had a purpose, had a goal.
Another bug limb was severed, followed by Raynar's opposite arm. A Force push sent Raynar stumbling backwards. Advancing, Anakin's purple glow continued to carve out the darkness of the room, leaving purple arcs in its wake. Raynar tried to flee by leaping away, but Anakin met the former Jedi mid-leap and sliced off Raynar's insect-modified leg. UnuThul fell back to the ground, hissing in pain.
More Killiks began to pour onto the platform. The moment they got in range of Tahiri's bug-jammer, however, they hesitated and became disorientated for a few seconds. That was all the time the other Jedi needed to keep the mass at bay.
Stepping on the carapace shell covering Raynar's chest, Anakin directed his blade at Raynar's face. "Deactivate the explosives, Raynar. Detonating them won't solve anything."
"We are ready to die for the Kind. Even if you stop us here today, the Kind will not rest until our goal is completed." Raynar answered in his croaky voice. "We will die to stop the darkness. We are a Jedi after all. You have one minute left, Anakin Solo."
"Raynar...please…" Anakin's sweaty grip shifted on his lightsaber. His eyes pleaded with his siblings' childhood friend. At the distance they were spread out, the Myrkr bond wasn't strong enough to fight the millions of minds. He wasn't as adept in mental manipulation as his brother or the Horns were. All he could do was pray that Raynar would make one last heroic push against the mockery he had become.
"Forty-five seconds," UnuThul said with maddening calm, meeting Anakin's gaze blankly. They held each other's gaze, both resolute in the choices they made.
"Raynar," Anakin whispered hoarsely.
A flicker of something in Raynar's human eye, a look of peace. It opened and closed with the slowest of movements, and Raynar's head nodded a fraction. "Thirty seconds…you're running out of time. Twenty-five…"
A flash of pain flickered across his face and Anakin swept his lightsaber in a crossing motion in front of him.
Raynar's disfigured head rolled across the platform for several long seconds. Then, a burst of Force energy rushed out from his body in a silent shockwave. The blast knocked everyone, Killik and Jedi alike, to the ground. Lightsabers were extinguished as the deadman switches flicked off. The entire room went dark.

Thirty seconds passed, and there was no rumble of explosives. No feel of mass death in the Force. The chamber stayed intact.
The Jedi had done it.
In the darkness a pair of blue eyes opened. A silent tear escaped unnoticed in the pitch blackness of the room. Breathing ragged, Anakin let his eyes close. An apology, mouthed soundlessly, escaped his lips, and he felt his chest clench once more. He had no doubt that the Ossus historians would record this as a victory. But at the moment, for Anakin, it seemed everything but one.
(-==-(End Scene 2)-==-)

Jacen
[.:(I):.]
After two months on the throne, now Jedi Master Jacen Solo had pretty much adapted to the intricacies that involved ruling sixty-three star systems, grown used to it. He had even had the time to pass his Jedi Master trials with Jedi Master Kirana Ti supervising him. Though Anakin might be the puzzle solver of the family, Hapan politics was one particular puzzle that Jacen was having no trouble with. As tangled as everything was, the motives were often straight forward.
As Jacen was able to see firsthand, Hapan nobles tended to act for one of four main reasons; to advance their House in the royal court, to advance their own position in said House, to support or resist the sitting regent, to support or resist a friendly or rival House in their own goals. It was fairly easy for Jacen—accustomed to the politics of thousands of worlds and agendas in the Galactic Alliance Senate—to 'help' the goals of these noble Houses line up with his own. Already he was being called Tenel Ka's 'Joiner King,' both for his ability to subdue the Killik infestation on Hapes, but also for the number of nobles and rival Houses that were 'joining' his call for a united Hapes.
With the Killik threat actually on Hapes proper, and with the loss of life the Jedi taskforce sustained repelling the initial strike, all of Hapes seemed to be rallying around the royal family image Jacen was projecting. Being a male didn't even seem to matter to most of the nobles as they bought into the idea that only the royal family had any idea how to defend Hapes from the threats that existed in the greater galaxy.
On one hand, Jacen knew the paradigm he was creating greatly mirrored the problems now faced by the Galactic Alliance; everyone turning to one or two people or groups of people to solve all the problems. But in order to decrease the enemies to Tenel Ka and Allana's throne, he needed to make them irreplaceable in the eyes of

those they ruled. But if Tenel Ka and Allana ran into a problem they couldn't fix, Hapes would quickly turn on them just as the galaxy had turned on Anakin.
On the other, Hapes was becoming more united than ever; facing a common foe that for the first time wasn't a fellow Hapan. They were truly beginning to see that the galaxy was a lot bigger than their little corner of it. Of course, the fact that many of the noble houses stood to make a profit from the treaties being made with the outside systems might have also proved just as helpful a motivator. Even the more stubborn houses, though they maintained their isolationist policies, saw how their more open-minded rivals were benefiting from said treaties and were beginning to have second thoughts.
But there were the stubborn noble houses, and there were the highly influential families within the Heritage Council. The Killik insurgency on Hapes was already proving tough to root out through conventional means. Added to the mess was that diplomacy dictated Jacen use joint Hapan-Jedi taskforces for any attack. If he wanted to keep up the message of 'united we are stronger' he had to show that results could be had even if the two military forces didn't always have the same ideas in mind. During the Vong War, the Hapans had mostly stayed with their own divisions and the war had taken place mostly outside of Consortium space.
After the war, most of the Hapans who had integrated into outside units had decided to settle down. This left a small communications and cultural gap between the myriad of people Jacen had brought with him and the Hapan Home Guard. This slight divide had initially hindered the hunt for the Killiks nests to the point that the miscommunications allowed several key Killiks to escape and start anew elsewhere.
Made more complicated was the fact that the Bothans had been forced to withdraw after the initial battle for the planet. The loss of their admiral and several key cruisers had caused Bothawuii to have a change of heart, and the remaining Bothan forces had pulled out with barely any forewarning.
At best, the military situation on Hapes could be described as stable and 'contained.' The Killiks were trapped in a sprawling gorge on Hapes and were unable to extend any further. But Jacen was treading a fine line and he knew it. All it took was another slip up and the Killiks could make life difficult once more.
It was ironic, Jacen mused, that had Anakin been in his position Anakin no doubt would have been able to wage a successful war on the Killiks but get tied up in the politics. Jacen may be a very skilled Jedi, a politician, and leader, but he wasn't a military commander. Sure he

might be able to move people to meet a plan, but war rarely followed anyone's agenda. Whereas his younger brother was able to quickly adapt his short-term plans to meet the situation, Jacen knew that his own designs tended to require drawn-out conditions that had to be met for the plan to continue.

Which is why the news he had received added to his list of headaches.

"Are you certain?" Jacen asked his Barabel friend, rubbing his own face tiredly. Seated around the square table were various military advisors and friends, all growing grim at the news Tesar had just relayed.

"The Corellian intelligence team on the fleet confirmed it," General Livette reinforced with a grim nod. "They'll be here in three days at the latest."

Tesar hissed. "The Heritage Council fleetz, all of them it seemz, are heading to Hapes to force a decisive battle for the throne."

"And Tenel Ka?"

"Iz bogged down fighting the Killik fleetz in the Zadaria system."

"The Corellians?" Jacen looked to the Corellian representative, Natua Wan and her apprentice.

The Falleen Knight tilted her head apologetically. "Also tied up in Relephon. At last word, they were taking heavy losses trying to keep the second Killik fleet occupied. Valin Horn's apprentice, Tiu Zax, and the dozen or so vessels we have under our command are all that we can spare. Granted, most of those vessels are troop-carriers and not armed for a space-battle."

Jacen looked out the nearby window. "Sounds just like the Jedi Coalition. We were geared for a ground battle, not a slugfest in space."

"We don't have nearly the same amount of ships the Heritage Council fleet has," Nelani piped in, scrolling through a datapad. "And some of the ships we brought were heavily damaged during the Killik's first move on this planet. If the Hapan Intel is correct, we're outnumbered five to one at the very least."

Captain Salle Serpa added his own opinion in his cool and emotionless voice. "On the bright side, if we form a successful plan, this provides us the perfect opportunity to wipe out the Hapan portion of the threat to the throne."

Jacen exchanged looks with his apprentice, who with a raised eyebrow appeared to dare him to answer the zealous soldier. "Unfortunately that won't provide any solution at all, captain."

"Sir?" Salle looked at Jacen in confusion.

Isolder was the one who answered. "Despite being influenced by the Killiks, any action the Jedi Coalition takes against *any* Hapan is going to set a dangerous precedent. From an outsider point of view, if they

engage the Heritage Fleet with their own ships, it will look as if the Jedi are forcing their way onto this isolated corner of the galaxy. And nothing will be more detrimental to the Jedi than for the rest of the galaxy to begin to fear them. They need to be seen as protectors, not aggressors, keepers of the peace, not agents of death."
Jacen inclined his head in agreement when Salle sent him a questioning glance. "It's true. Despite the unfavorable odds, we have to make them even less palatable by keeping our own ships from firing on any Heritage Council ships."
"That is where we come in," Ducha Astarta spoke up. "The Home Fleet is more than willing to become 'agents of death' once more. We repelled the Vong when they tried to take this system, and the odds were a lot greater."
"It may just come down to that, but it might not. Where are we on the science side of things?" Jacen looked to Sanix Fous and Sinsor Khal. The Hapan ex-Jedi scientist spoke first. "We've managed to refine and perfect the serum we use to counter the Joining. We've also utilized the Alderaanian diaspora's information on the Killik toxins and produced mass quantities of it. The first batches are already being sent to our forward units to aid in the extermination of the Killiks in the Shahal Gorge."
"It sounds like you have something planned," Sanix said in turn.
"Yes," Jacen nodded, his face impassive. "It will appear to make little sense now, but in the long term will benefit everyone."
"You want to save the Heritage Council members," Jedi Master Kirana Ti commented evenly.
"Yes," Jacen answered simply. Several at the table looked at him incredulously, and some did more than that.
"That's crazy, sir," Salle Serpa objected. "What, you expect them to become so grateful that we saved them that they'll fall in line with us? They *want* your family dead, they let their own ambitions get the better of them and caused the deaths of so many people already. And now you expect our soldiers to risk their lives to save someone who will have no compulsions to spare them?"
"Yes," Jacen repeated. He held out a stalling hand as nobles and officers protested. "Say we take Captain Serpa's route. Ducha Astarta's people engage the Heritage Council and wipe them out. That will leave a power-vacuum which Hapes cannot afford to have at the moment. House AlGray, Chell, Galney, Gheer, Thane, Aros, they're all some of the oldest and most established Houses in the Consortium. Mining, farming, technology, trade, aid-work, medicinal supplies, all these Houses contribute close to a third of the output used by the

Consortium as a whole. We wipe them out, what then? The chaos that follows will leave the Queen Mother's position severely weakened even when she does emerge victorious against the Killiks. Stop thinking of this as a Hapan civil war, and instead view it as a war against the Killiks who are using Hapan slaves."
"Then what do you intend to do, Jacen?" Tesar asked.
"We have more than enough ground-forces, but what we lack are ships," Jacen began, pressing the tips of his fingers against each other. "We'll board as many of the Heritage Council ships as we can. The strike-teams will then deliver payloads of the Joiner-neutralizing agent into the ventilation systems of each ship. Estimates place the number of Heritage Council capital and escort ships at close to sixty, correct?"
Nelani looked up from her datapad. "Forty Nova cruisers, twenty-five Battle Dragons."
Several officers winced. General Livette voiced their thoughts. "It's going to be hell covering the assault shuttles. The Home Fleet at the moment is only twenty-five battle cruisers and ten Battle Dragons strong. No way can we go toe-to-toe without losing a lot of good people."
"Nevertheless, it's what has to be done," Jacen said emotionlessly. "Hapes needs to be as close to stable as it can be when this conflict is over. Those who die will do so securing a brighter future for all Hapans. The Galactic Alliance forces will make up the bulk of the boarding parties, so we'll be fighting and dying right alongside your people, General."
"Sir!" A voice from the door called out, interrupting the morbid direction the meeting was taking . "A courier from the Queen Mother has arrived!"
"Let her in."
The courier entered and performed a short bow. "Her Royal Highness sends her fondest regards and bid me to relay the following message. The message is as follows: A portion of the Killik fleet assaulting Hapan positions in Zadaria has broken away and is heading towards Hapes. Strongly believe that dark Jedi Lomi is with this fleet. Before they jumped, scans put the number of capital ship-sized vessels at ten. Fighter carriers at eight. Will try to reinforce your position as soon as able but the Killiks will arrive first. The Queen Mother would also like to remind you that the throne of Hapes is hers and that she'll be extremely displeased if she returns to find Lomi in her place."
"Well," Captain Serpa remarked in the following silence. "At least the Galactic Alliance ships now have something to do too."

"The Killiks really are going all out, aren't they?" Nelani looked to her master for reassurance.
Jacen just nodded. "Now that they've been exposed, they no longer have to tread carefully."
"Let them come," the Noghri commander, Sakhisakh, growled. "It doesn't matter how many. They'll fall to our blades all the same."
"You heard the man," Jacen gestured to the Noghri. "Sinsor, Sanix. Start getting the Joiner-gas ready to go. We have sixty-five plus ships to fill."
"We'll get right on it."
"General Livette, Master Ti, please ready the infantry and tank units for ship-to-ship boarding action."
"Sir."
"Jedi Solo."
Jacen rotated his gaze to his fleet-commanders. "Ducha Astarta, prepare the Home Fleet for what is to come. Captain Serpa, the Jedi Coalition contingent. The Jedi Coalition capital ships will take the Killiks, the Hapans will cover the assault shuttles as best they can."
"Understood," Captain Serpa saluted sharply.
Astarta tilted her head. "Might I enquire as to where you will be?"
"As the sitting Crown Prince it's my duty to greet royalty," Jacen remarked lightly. "If Lomi wants to take throne, she has to go through me. I'll be right up in orbit with everyone, seeing this through to the end."
[.:(II):.]
Jacen could barely remember the last time he was in an X-wing. The fact that the cockpit was an unfamiliar Chase-X, the next generation of the famous fighter, only added to his pensive state. What *was* familiar, however, was the battleground and familiar planetary shapes of the Hapan home system.
The ever present asteroid belt that had caused the Yuuzhan Vong some amount of trouble during *their* invasion was once again being used to funnel another numerically superior force. Interdictor mines, namely dovin basals reappropriated after the end of the war, were laid out on one side of the asteroid belt to prevent any incursion deeper into the system. Knowing which direction the Heritage Council fleet and the Killiks were coming allowed the strategists to determine the exit vectors and plan accordingly.
A conventional plan was to lay out the mines and have the ships fire the moment the Force told them to. A conventional plan would have the defenders in positions on the other end of the asteroid field ready to blow apart the enemy ships the moment they emerged.

Unfortunately, Jacen Solo was not a conventional Jedi, and his plans were far from conventional.
Even he didn't know how things would work out. After all, he was planning to fight a starship battle with *ground* forces. Two-hundred thousand of them packed up in boarding craft waiting for the right opportunity to take the Heritage Council ships. There was a reason it had never been attempted before, probably to do with it being utterly insane. But he wanted to keep Hapes as intact as possible, and the only way to do that was meet the Killik's 'all-in' with one of his own. The upcoming battle was either going to be an amazing success or unmitigated disaster.
"*All ships, hyperspace distortions detected at the edge of the system, interdictor mines are active."* The steady voice of the comm-operator came over the channel. "*Ducha Astarta requests one last check-in."*
Jacen tuned out the squadron commanders and ship captains as they reported in one by one. He ran his own system's check, then released a long breath. Though separated by an asteroid field, Jacen could feel the Heritage Council ships arrive through the Force. Then, synchronized like only a hive-mind can be, the Killiks vessels arrived only minutes later. With the Killik fleet was indeed another Force presence, that of the fallen Jedi Lomi.
Despite being dragged out of hyperspace far from their target, Jacen could sense no concern or surprise from the Killiks. They were mindlessly locked onto their goal; complete devastation of the planet of Hapes.
"*Estimates say two hours before the enemy fleet clears the asteroid field."* The report over the comm-system called in.
Jacen, however, shook his head. He could already sense Lomi reaching out and slaving the minds of the ship navigators to her own will. He thumbed the comm-button. "Negative control, they'll be through much sooner. They have the Force guiding them."
"*Impossible! They're hitting the asteroid field at full speed!"* Exclaimed another pilot.
Flashes of turbolasers clearing a lane could be seen by the awaiting defenders. The nearly seventy capital ship of the Heritage Council and Killik fleet unleashed torrents of devastating energy without even slowing.
"Let them come through. Stick to your targets," Jacen ordered coolly.
The minutes passed with agonizing slowness as the Killik-Heritage Council fleet pressed through with reckless abandon. Sensor readings could see that not every ship was making it through unscathed, but that the entire fleet was still intact half-way through.

"*Impossible.*" Whispered the Hapan pilot once more.
"*All ships, at present rate it will be twenty minutes until the first vessel clears the asteroid belt. Heritage Council ships in front. Stand by and ready your wings.*"
Jacen released another breath and mentally reviewed the layout of a Killik capital ship. Well, one of the layouts. The Hapans had seen a great many of them emerge from the moons orbiting Hapes and had a relatively detailed analyses of their capabilities. The only problem was, each of the Killik capital ships had been different in design, shape, and abilities. They were the epitome of an 'Ugly' capital ship, with prows of Star Destroyers, engine bays of Nebulon-B cruisers, Mon Calamari cruiser port sections, scrap-metal hangar bays, and anything else the Killiks had gotten their pincers on, assembled in any order. As if they had raided every single junkyard and black-market and then slapped together whatever they found.
The minutes continued to tick by, the ships coming into visual range in frightening time. Leading the pack were a dozen *Nova*-class battle-cruisers, their gun batteries blazing non-stop in a flurry of red. Behind them were the first line of Heritage Council Battle Dragons. As the capital ships cleared the field, Hapan fighters began pouring out of them, streams of X-wings, Miy'til, and even E-wings.
"*Enemy fighters coming in!*"
"*Hold position.*"
"In optimal firing range now!"
"*Ion-cannon crews, prepare to open fire. Dagger Wing, prepare to deploy.*"
"Dagger Wing ready."
"Ion and EMP mines are going hot. Move the moment they detonate."
Blazes of blue poured out of the Hapan Home Fleet and splashed against the shields of the oncoming vessels. Many of the Home Fleet's gun batteries had been replaced with ion-cannons solely for the battle and were dishing out a punishing, electrical-scrambling barrage as the Heritage Council ships emerged from the asteroid belt.
Then the specialized minefield detonated. Bright flashes of electrical pulses crippled whole Killik-controlled fighter squadrons and brought down shields.
"*Dagger Wing. Go! Go! Go!*"
Several hundred assault shuttles and transports dove into the fray, making beelines for their designated ships. Heritage Council turbolasers that tried to fire on them were subject to fightercraft strafing runs, or artillery strikes from Hapan tanks mounted on the outside of the troop transports.

Handfuls of capital ships had been knocked out of the fight, but the Killiks and Heritage Council still had many more to spare. The Heritage Council ships returned fire with everything they had, their more lethal fast-firing turbolasers blasting into the Home Fleet remorselessly. Enemy fighters also joined the fray, swooping in on the approaching transports like raptors.

They were met by Jedi Coalition and Home Fleet fighters, who had their hands full escorting their charges. Fighters flared out of existence, several transports were broadsided by warheads. Yet more of the transports were beginning to reach their destinations.

Jacen only half-watched the battle unfold from the seat of his fighter. The Killiks had still yet to emerge and they were his ultimate goal. As the comm-channels filled with chatter, he used the Force to tighten up the Hapan formations. With the Wild Knights and Lowbacca augmenting the meld, the Hapan Home Fleet moved every bit as in sync as their hive-minded enemies.

And then said hive-minded enemies finally cleared the asteroid field. Their intent was clear. While the larger Heritage Council fleet engaged the Home Fleet, a gap had been opened in the defender's formation. A gap the Killiks were aiming to exploit. Without even slowing to engage the enemy, the junkyard capital ships blazed forward at full speed.

Jacen tracked the ship Lomi was on. Naturally it had to be the largest and most heavily armed of the Killik capital ships, sitting right in the middle of the Killik fleet.

"*Jedi Coalition vessels, fire at will*," Captain Serpa's order transmitted. The Star Destroyers and Mon Calamari cruisers of the Jedi Coalition fleet opened fire with all batteries. The fighter squadrons unleashed their warheads, and the smaller frigates and light cruisers bore down after the fast-moving Killik fleet.

In response, literal streams of dart-fighters poured out of the Killik fighter-carriers like tendrils of liquid metal. Squadron after squadron of the narrow dart-shaped fighters were released. Some immediately veered into the path of oncoming warheads, sacrificing themselves to protect their carriers. Others flew to engage the Jedi Coalition ships in suicidal dives.

And then fighters of all sorts began to pour from the ten Killik capital ships, their type and number just as hodgepodge as the ships they were emerging from. Crewed by Joiners, the X-wings, Y-wings, TIE fighters, Howlrunners, Uglies, and various other fighter classes that poured out, likewise moved to engage the attackers. They moved as a single organism. The hive-mind directing them just as effectively as a yammosk or master strategist.

"This is just too bizarre," a Coalition pilot breathed, his own X-wing taking on a Killik-controlled X-wing.
"Wild Knights, all fighters, let's do this," Jacen ordered. "Accelerate to attack speed. Captain Serpa focus on the capital ships. Ignore the carriers."
"*Affirmative Twin Suns Lead. By the way, Lead, the bug-ships can move a lot faster than we can. With the fighter cover, we might not be able to stop them before they reach Hapes."*
"Take out as many as you can then," Jacen pulled the trigger and sent a quartet of red lasers into the aft of a dart-fighter. "We know they're stopping at Hapes. We'll decide the battle there."
All around Killik-controlled fighters swarmed, screaming, dive-bombing, and strafing any targets of opportunity. Where one fighter might start an attack, a second fighter would swoop in to finish the unfortunate Coalition pilot off. Even the Wild Knights were hard-pressed to keep up with the multitude of minds.
"*They are hunting like pack-animalz,"* Tesar hissed. "*And there are more of them than there are of uz."*
"[*They're also suicidal!]"* Lowbacca rowled, juking his fighter hard as three dart-fighters tried to ram into him. The Killik fighters missed, but didn't even bother correcting their course as they instead immolated themselves in close succession into the bridge of a Coalition frigate. The remains of the last of the three fighters blew out the back of the vessel, coring it from bridge to the engines and leaving a dying hulk in its wake. *"[How do you fight something that doesn't even care if it lives or dies?]"*
It was pandemonium, the Killik fighters outnumbering the Jedi Coalition's own fighters several times over. The upside was that the Killik hive-mind also didn't mind sacrificing three or four of its own fighters to take out a single Jedi Coalition fighter. It was a dangerous gamble, but one that began to pay off as the Coalition capital ships were forced to abandon their pursuit of the Killik capital ships to cover their beleaguered fighters. Even then, the repeated flares against the shields of the capital ships showed that the Killiks weren't afraid of colliding with these larger vessels as well.
Jacen detected the shift in the Force indicating imminent danger and prompted keyed his comlink again. "Captain Serpa, take evasive action now! One of the carriers is on a collision course with you!"
Holding his breath, Jacen watched as the yellow Star Destroyer promptly obeyed, its engines glowing brighter as it banked in a sharp turn. Its course took its triangle nose through a swath of enemy fighters, pasting them against its hull like bugs on a windshield and

causing several explosions across its prow. In slow motion, the Killik carrier that had suddenly angled itself towards the Star Destroyer, seemed to glide past it with only millimeters to spare. Captain Serpa, not one to be idle, ordered all of his guns to fire on the offending ship. But then the Killik carrier detonated itself, engulfing both it and the front section of the *Anja Gallandro* in a ball of flame. The smoke hadn't even cleared and several squadrons of Killik fighters raced in, guns blazing. More explosions appeared in the giant cloud of smoke and debris. Even as Jacen watched the battered Star Destroyer fire back at its attackers, he was also keenly aware of how quickly the rest of the Killik fleet was approaching Hapes itself.

Jacen checked his squadron's switchboard. Twin Suns had been reformed for the Coalition, made up of veterans of the Yuuzhan Vong War. Unlike the previous incarnation, he was the only Force-sensitive pilot in the squadron. "Twin Suns, follow my lead. We have bugs to catch up to."

"What about the Anja Gallandro and the rest of the fleet, lead?"

"They're doing their job, we have ours to do," Jacen answered. "If the bugs link up with the ones on Hapes, we're in for a world of trouble. After all, most of our ground forces are currently with the Home Fleet storming the Heritage Council ships."

"*And how are we going to stop them?"*

"Rough landing on the command ship, Five." Jacen remarked with a small smirk. "You weren't assigned all those blaster-packs because we had a surplus sale you know."

"I was almost afraid of that," the wry voice of the veteran soldier answered. "*You'd think after following you Solos for several campaigns I'd learn not to ask questions like that. All I have to do is think of something ridiculous and it's normally the plan of the day."*

"You know us too well," Jacen forced out a laugh. "Remember, follow my lead and I'll get us onto the command ship in one piece."

"*Roger."*

The twelve fighters roared through space after the Killik cruisers. Lomi sensed their approach and immediately tasked three of her ten ships to bar their way.

"Concentrate missiles on the following coordinates." Two-dozen warheads streaked out shortly after, blowing a hole in the mid-section of the center-most of the Killik cruisers. "Stick tight, it's going to get cramped."

As the remaining two Killik cruisers opened fire with their turbolasers, the Twin Suns juked and dove, rolled and looped and otherwise evaded the slower bolts of energy. They then punched straight through the

hole of the middle cruiser in tight fashion, leaving the two functioning cruisers in their wake.
Several frigate analogs moved into position, but the Twin Suns agilely twisted over and under the ships and avoided the hail of laser fire to continue their course. Had the Killiks kept fighters in reserve, the pilots of Twin Suns would be in trouble. But fortunately or not, all the dart-fighters were currently tied up with the Jedi Coalition force and were unable to pursue.
"Designating our target," Jacen announced, aiming his fighter towards a capital ship that looked to be a mix between the snail-like back half of a Ssi-ruuvi cruiser and the pointed front of a Star Destroyer.
"*Hope it still has a hangar bay that makes sense."* One of the Twin Suns pilots commented.
Jacen's sensor board began to beep, indicating missile locks.
"Everyone hang tight, this is going to be the fun part," Jacen remarked. Using the Force to direct the rest of his squadron, he took them on another series of dives and breakneck turns. The beeping turned to a solid tone as missiles were fired.
"*Sensors picking up three dozen missiles, Lead!"*
"I know, Three. Trust me, I'll get us through this." Jacen said through gritted teeth, his concentration divided between piloting his own fighter and guiding the fighters of everyone in his squadron.
The twelve snubfighters made a run at another one of the Killik capital ships left behind by Lomi. In the withering storm of turbolaser fire, the Killiks inadvertently picked off a quarter of the missiles trailing after the fighters. Jacen kept the formation close, passing through the magnetic shielding of the ship and skimming over the hull with centimeters to spare. Another handful of warheads couldn't adjust in time and ended up blasting large holes into the hodgepodge capital ship. One of the warheads struck a vital part, and the entire ship went dead.
The ship exploded beneath them, and the fighter squadron rode out the growing blaze at breakneck speed. "*Yeeehaa!"*
Jacen smiled at the exuberance, but they still had over a dozen warheads locked onto them. The Twin Suns continued forward, now avoiding the rapid fire of four more capital ships.
"*Lead my shields are out, one more hit and I'm fried!"*
"Hang in there Ten," Jacen gritted his teeth, adjusting their formation so that the shields of the other fighters helped to cover the stricken fighter. "Almost there."
Ahead, Jacen could see Lomi's flagship and two others enter into a high orbit over Hapes. Hapan planetary defense cannons fired volley after

volley at the ships, but Lomi's ships returned in kind. Temporarily distracted by the thought of his daughter in the Hapan Palace, Jacen's concentration slipped.
"*We lost Seven and Nine! Geri and Rian are gone!"* The cry over the comm-system quickly shook Jacen from his thoughts.
"Almost there!"
"*The capital ships we left behind are catching up!"*
"We just need a few more seconds," Jacen breathed.
"*We better hurry up, they're right behind us!"*
"R-Six, try to increase the power!" Jacen barked as his sensor panel indicated another batch of warheads had been fired at them.
The distance seemed to decrease at a painfully slow rate, the canopy of their fighters lit up in the glow of explosions and laser fire. Above Hapes, the Killik capital ships continued to rain down punishing barrages at any sign of resistance.
Jacen saw the lateral hangar bay of his target and activated his weapons' systems. The minute he got a solid lock, he let loose all four warheads in his fighter's arsenal. The heavy rockets streaked forward and tore through the shielding of Lomi's flagship. The hangar bay doors were blown open with authority, the sudden depressurization sucking everything inside into the void of space before mag-con fields could activate.
At the same time, another warhead caught up to Twin Suns and ripped apart one of the Chase-X fighters in formation.
"Who'd we lose?" Jacen called out, mentally cursing.
"*That was Four*!"
Jacen just clenched his jaw and kept his fighter on course towards the burning remains of the open hangar. The seconds seemed to snap back into regular time, and the remaining nine fighters of Twin Suns ripped through the mag-con field and came to crashing stops inside the hangar.
Canopies were popped open, and the surviving pilots emerged with blaster-rifles at the ready.
"Keep this place secure," Jacen ordered, climbing out of his cockpit. "We're going to want a ride out of here in case things go wrong."
"Sir," Twin Suns Two, who like the previous Twin Suns Two, was a Nemoidian pilot, acknowledged with a tilt of his head. "Good luck stopping the bug-queen, sir."
Jacen nodded once, checking his lightsaber and other gear. "We've been running on luck so far. Hope it can take us that one last distance."
[.:(III):.]

If he hadn't had the Force to guide him, he would have been hopelessly lost in the seemingly nonsensical way the ship was designed. Corridors led to nowhere, doors opened to small holes that only the smallest of Killiks could fit through. Most hallways were unlit, and those that were were illuminated in dim red lighting. The rusted and bent metal walls were covered with some sort of organic webbing, the air was stale, full of Killik pheromones, and the floor was covered in filth. Clicks, chitters, growls, and all sorts of noises sounded from the walls, from every crack and crevice.

The few Killiks Jacen did see didn't seem to care about his presence one bit.

Which for Jacen, meant that his trip to the Star Destroyer bridge tower was filled only with the creepy feeling one got when walking through a giant bug's nest.

The turbolift was non-functional, but the handholds in the shaft were still present, so Jacen began his ascent.

The Force was telling him that Lomi didn't seem to particularly care that he was approaching. In fact, as he stretched out his sense, he could feel that Lomi actually welcomed his arrival with a glee only a dark Jedi could have at the prospect of a conflict. An undercurrent of the Hapan Heritage Council's desire, for a new royal family, also laced the emotions emanating from the bug-queen; showing that even she wasn't immune from the wishes of millions of Hapans. In a distorted way, she wanted to legitimize herself by taking out the current Hapan ruler, just as Hapan rulers of the past had done so.

Jacen shook his head as he continued to pull himself upwards. The Killik hive-mind was a jumbled mess of thoughts, the strongest desires coming out ahead regardless of how tactically sound or conflicting they may be. He didn't know what brought Lomi to the Hapes in the first place, or why she was leading an army of bugs, and he intended to find out. The Killiks he had read about never acted without a reason, and there had to be something more to their actions.

After all, one didn't become a homicidal maniac bent on throwing the galaxy into turmoil without a *very* good reason.

He pulled himself up to the final level, half expecting an army of Killiks, or a security force of Joiner to greet him. Given that the entire ship was teeming with bug-life, there had to be *someone* in the command tower of Lomi's flagship.

There was someone, a single someone. Seated by the row of bridge windows over the standard Star Destroyer bridge pit was a figure hunched over in torn and shredded robes. Lomi herself, or what was left of Lomi. The leader of the Killik forces in Hapes barely resembled

anything human. Both her legs were Killik legs, the skin on her arms was studded with barbs and chitinous plates. Her torso was encased in custom-made armor made up of the shell of the giant beetle-creatures Jacen had seen on Hapes. And her face…

It was hard for Jacen to control his emotions. The bone of her lower jaw was exposed in places, seemingly held together by a few strands of flesh and muscle. She had no hair, eyebrows or on top of her head. In fact, she didn't appear to have any eyes –or nose for that matter-flesh had grown over her eye sockets and only two small holes appeared where her nose had once been. Instead, antenna embedded on the top of her head swiveled about acting as her primary sensor organs. Sensing no suffering from the disfigured woman before him, Jacen hesitantly reached out through the Force. All at once he was inundated with memories.

The Tachyon Flier wasn't able to make it off Myrkr unscathed. After all Nom Anor himself had had ships guarding the planet. A plasma missile had slammed into the aged freighter just as it was making its leap into hyperspace. A split second later, the terrified trio on board would have been safe. But none of the three had been skilled pilots, and they never had that reprieve of a single second.

The explosion tore through the unarmored vessel like a lightsaber through flesh. Secondary blasts ripped into the engine compartment and blew the ship out of hyperspace.

Alarms were blaring as the ship careened uncontrollably in the unknown system. Fires raced wherever there was oxygen. Already Lomi could see the pitiful Jedi boy engulfed in flames, screaming and rolling about. Welk was no better, a large piece of shrapnel had sheered him in two and it was only his hatred and terror that allowed him to use the Force to sustain his life.

The view of the stars outside spun in sickening circles as Lomi desperately tried to regain control of the dying ship.

The control panel next to Lomi erupted, and she felt blinding pain in the bottom half of her face as she was thrown to the ground. Another blast, and in her stunned state, it took her a moment but she quickly realized that she too had caught fire. Her cries joined Raynar's as she futilely batted at the flames.

And then the Tachyon Flier came to a violent crashing halt, slamming into a giant moon-sized asteroid. Lomi was tossed about like a ragdoll, her vision going dark, yet she still remained conscious. Through the Force she could only stare in disbelief as her legs flew in one direction…away from her body.

Pain and terror, she shared it all with Welk and Raynar.

None of the three wanted to die, they all wanted to live. They called out for help even as the atmosphere of the ship vented and extinguished the flames.
They were going to die on the ball of space rock, alone, in agony. Their strength was leaving them, despair intensifying.
A clicking sound was heard, and the three barely-conscious Force-users forced themselves to look in the direction of the sound.
An outline of a Killik was felt in the Force.
"*Help," Lomi croaked, not wanting to die. She wasn't ready yet, not when the task her master had given her was incomplete. "Please."*
The Killiks obliged.
The memory ended, Jacen swallowing heavily. "That looked like it hurt."
"*We feel no pain, Solo. Do not pity us. The Kind knew nothing of medical care before Raynar was Joined, knew nothing of a human's anatomy. We tried to repair what was once Lomi using the anatomy we knew then,"* the words were croaked out of a half-exposed throat, the meaning made clear with the Force. "*The Kind takes care of us, and in turn we help it with its duty to the galaxy."*
"Duty?"
"*We are like you. We are a battle of darkness, using methods deemed distasteful by many to avoid an even worse fate. Smaller evils to negate a greater one. Is that not worth the price of a galaxy at peace?"*
"But the galaxy isn't at peace."
"*No, but it will be."*
"Lomi was a dark Jedi," Jacen pointed out. "She would want a galaxy in darkness."
"*No!"* Lomi croaked back. "*Lomi wanted a galaxy of order, not of darkness. A galaxy with one power securing the peace of everyone. She saw the Jedi as weak, incapable of making the decisions that had to be done to keep chaos at bay. We are fulfilling that wish for her, burning the galaxy to preserve it. We have grown legions to meet her wish, we have made her the ultimate power in the Hapes Consortium."*
"Then what?"
"*Then we will continue with the wishes of the others who have Joined. We will continue with the wishes of the Kind."*
"Why?" Jacen asked, now standing at the other end of the bridge walkway. He briefly glanced down and saw that the crew-pits were empty. It was just Lomi controlling the Killiks on the ship through sheer will alone.
"*We have already explained ourselves,"* Lomi answered. "*Already your brother has killed one of the Kind. He knows why we do what must be*

done. Why we save the galaxy in the name of the Jedi, of the Sith, of the Hapans, Ssi-ruuvi, Vagaari, Verpine, and the many others who have Joined with us. All Joiners are in agreement with the Kind, and we carry out their will."
"Anakin's killed one of the Kind?" Jacen said in mild alarm.
"*UnuThul is no longer with us, but his memories and thoughts remain."*
Jacen took that news with a moment of silence. Something must have happened for Anakin to have killed Raynar, he couldn't think of any other reason. He was stirred from his thoughts when he felt the ship shift. The engines were activating.
The ship was pointed directly at the Hapan capital city.
In alarm, Jacen looked to Lomi. "What do you hope this will accomplish?"
"*We are a queen. The last vestiges of the old ruling family must be razed to make room for a new era."*
Jacen hesitantly reached for his lightsaber, but halted his motion. "Do you truly think the rest of Hapes will listen to you?"
"When they Join with us, they will."
The planet was fast approaching, the Star Destroyer front of the ship beginning to glow red from the friction of entry.
"All this death, all this chaos. You will destroy everything and have nothing left to rule, no people to rule over."
"*Then we will rule over a barren wasteland devoid of light or dark. We will finally reach an equilibrium in the Force that has long been absent in this galaxy. We will have placated the great threat that sleeps so She will never know the waking world again. We will have saved the Kind, completed the task given to us millennia ago. Equal parts light, equal parts dark. If there is only death, there is no light. If there is no chaos, there is harmony. If there is no hope, there is peace*."
"That peace would be a lie," Jacen argued, his hand falling back to his side. Mentally, he sent a message to the pilots of Twin Suns to take off. No need for them to stay onboard now that the ship's fate was sealed.
"*Without hope, there is no passion to live. Without life, there is no emotion. And with death comes peace."*
"You threaten everyone's way of living and their passion will be all the stronger." Jacen shook his head. "They'll gain strength from it. Strength that will give them the power to fight back out of whatever corner you push them into."
Like a meteor, the ship blazed red and white as it punched through the upper atmosphere of the planet. It wasn't even making any attempt to decelerate.

Jacen inwardly grimaced. Tenel Ka was *not* going to like the fact that he let a giant Killik-controlled ship ram her palace. "There is another way. A way to preserve the Kind and preserve the lives that might be lost fighting the war."
"There is none."
"None that Lomi, Welk, or Raynar knew of," Jacen countered. "But there are trillions of others alive in this galaxy. The Kind has only absorbed an isolated few million at best."
"*We have absorbed dozens of races over the course of our time, eons before you were born. We have taken in countless users of the Force and analyzed their philosophies. Not one Joiner had the answer to the questions we asked. Not one had a solution to forestall the approaching darkness. We seek to halt a chain-reaction in progress, and this course of action gives us the best possible chance. The Kind as rulers can direct the chain of events in other directions, away from the fluttering eyes of the Silver-Eyed Sleeper. We will make the Consortium a bastion from which we can control the galaxy."*
The clouds in the windows cleared, the ship scorching a path through the Hapan sky. In the fast-shrinking distance, Jacen could make out the basalt crag on which the Hapan Royal Palace sat. Jacen supposed he was fortunate that Allana was nowhere near the palace. After all, the palace was like a giant 'destroy me' beacon to anyone who wanted to gain the Hapan throne.
Not that that reassurance improved his situation any. The collision was still imminent.
Using the Force to ground himself, much like Lomi was doing, the Jacen couldn't help but hold his breath and grimace.
The impact was deafening and bone-jarring, the front of the ship slamming headlong into the giant rocky base; with explosions rippling across the triangle fore-section and sending large black rock fragments spiraling in all directions. The momentum of the ship continued on, driving it into the rocky cliff-face directly underneath the palace. Metal crumpled like paper, transparasteel windows blowing out in a hail of dagger-like shards, the entire ship ripping to shreds all around them. But in a terrifying display of Force use and an utter disregard for life, the Killiks on the ship fed their life-forces to Lomi, sacrificing themselves and empowering the Joined dark Jedi like fuel to a furnace. The Force manifested around the female Dathomiri Jedi in a blaze of blood-red, absorbing the kinetic energy of the crash and the fast extinguishing lives of the millions of Killiks onboard and becoming ever stronger. By sheer will alone, Lomi was keeping the bridge unscathed

from the brutal impact. Even as the rest of the capital ship disappeared into a blaze of fire and debris, the bridge remained untouched.
Parts of the basalt plateau gave way, massive black boulders toppling downwards. The western wing of the palace likewise began to crumble, its foundations sliding away with the rest of the rocks. Metallic thunks and bangs echoed through the bridge for several long seconds.
And then all was quiet.
Weakly, Jacen pushed himself up to his hands and knees, his ears ringing from the deafening collision of starship and rock wall. The smell of melting metal and wires abundant. Fires crackled all around, the bridge an intact but complete mess. He tasted blood from where he had bit his lip, and then coughed out a small glob of blood. He looked for Lomi and saw her a little ways away.
The misshapen dark Jedi Lomi Plo was likewise picking herself off the ground. When she sensed his gaze, she simply turned around and began to walk out of the shattered viewport. As she did, she held out her arms and swarms of tiny bugs emerged from the debris and flew up into her sleeves. She then leaped upwards and out of sight.
Shaking his head and calling on the Force to revitalize him at faster-than-normal rates, Jacen scrambled to his feet. He had so many questions that still needed asking. So many answers he wanted to know. But he also knew he couldn't let Lomi continue her reign of terror. He unclipped his lightsaber from his belt and hurried after the dark Jedi.
He could already hear a storm of blasterfire from somewhere above and hoped the Hapan Palace Guard had the sense to run when they realized their struggles were pointless. The fact that the blasterfire was soon replaced by screams of terror and pain dashed those hopes.
Bounding up the twisted formations of rock and metal, Jacen landed on the lower level of the Hapan palace. The entire western side had fallen away, leaving a magnificent hole in the magnificent palace. Exposed wires, rebar, jagged rock, and splintered marble floor tiles marked the start of what was left of the palace.
The half-eaten bodies of a dozen security guards, some with tiny bugs crawling through open wounds, marked where they had engaged Lomi. Jacen swiftly bypassed their corpses in a hurry, following Lomi's Force presence across a courtyard and towards the many columned Lorell Hall.
Hearing more blaster fire emanating from the building, he sent a mental 'cease and desist' message to Lomi. In turn, he felt a surge in the Force and promptly dove for cover as the Joiner dark Jedi sent a pillar of marble blasting through one of the towering windows. Dust,

glass, and bits of stone pelted him in any case. The column flew onwards and slammed into a weakened palace wall, blowing a hole in that as well. Jacen glanced at the destruction with another grimace. *Tenel Ka is really going to kill me.*

Through the hole made by the pillar, Jacen could see Lomi in the center of Lorell Hall. The dark Jedi turned in his direction, her face expressionless but her Force signature annoyed. In each of her insect-modified hands was a lightsaber.

Still holding his gaze with her own sightless eyes, Lomi activated the blades. Twin beams of molten gold emerged. She flung her lightsabers out and severed another column. A section of the roof collapsed as the support fell away, but that wasn't what Jacen was worried about. Still using the tremendous boost given to her by the Killiks, Lomi effortless pointed the pillar in his direction and sent it flying like a missile.

Jacen dove out of the way again and heard the column shatter against another part of the palace wall. Quickly rising to his feet, Jacen put away his lightsaber once more and held out both hands. A third column was sent shooting towards him at frightening speeds.

Before it had even left Lorell Hall, however, Jacen exerted his own Force abilities onto the ballistic projectile. It was a battle of wills and laws of momentum as he attempted to stop it from causing any more damage. Lomi wasn't pleased. Abandoning control of that column, her lightsabers scythed apart two more. Considering the Lorell Hall was held up by sixty-three rows of sixty-three columns, Lomi had more than enough ammo to go around.

Jacen hastily abandoned his own grip on the lone column and once again sprinted out of the way as the two additional columns of marble came blasting out of the side of the Lorell Hall. By that point, the wall facing the palace was wholly decimated and promptly crumbled as the two giant pillars blasted through.

Deciding that defense wasn't working out, Jacen called on the Force to augment his speed and promptly darted into the meeting hall to put a stop to everything.

Lomi sent bits and pieces of collapsed ceiling flying towards him, but he swatted them aside. She held out her arms and a swarm of black bugs came pouring out of it. Jacen spun his lightsaber and the charging bugs went up in a poof of smoke.

Lomi showed no signs of panicking. Instead, she tilted her expressionless head slightly. "*You doubt whether killing us is the right thing, do you not, Jacen?*"

Jacen hesitated. The moment he did, Lomi appeared to disappear right before his very eyes.

"You cannot kill what you cannot see."
"Sight is only one of the senses, Lomi," Jacen remarked, closing his eyes. He agilely twisted to the side, hearing but not seeing twin golden blades slice through the air he had just occupied. He thrust his hand out in one direction and was rewarded by a spider-web cracking pattern in one of the columns. Even though he couldn't see the figure that made the impact, the spike of pain through the Force let him know he had hit his target. "And you're right, I do doubt whether killing you is right or not. But at least I acknowledge my doubts, face them and not turn away from them. By confronting my doubts, they stay at the front of my mind. As does anything hiding in them."
Jacen's dark brown eyes opened again, this time they were shimmering with Force energy. Lomi, who was in the process of getting back to her feet, realized that her foe could see her. With a mental snarl she sent both her lightsabers flying again. They sliced through column after column and were accompanied by powerful Force Waves that sent the vertical posts flying horizontally at Jacen from all directions. Fragments of rock exploded everywhere, the columns crashing into other pillars with deafening blasts.
Jacen leaped and rolled, using his own lightsaber to slice apart any column he couldn't dodge. The roof of the Lorell Hall began to collapse, and Lomi took the opportunity to kick off another flying column to ascend. Jacen followed, avoiding falling ceiling beams and spinning pieces of rocky shrapnel.
The Joined dark Jedi landed, her antennae swiveling and sensing Jacen close behind. She sent pieces of rock flying at Jacen, but he wrenched them from her control and let them fall harmlessly on either side of him. Lomi leaped again, this time landing on the roof of the palace greenhouse.
Jacen again chased her, his green blade flashing in the Hapan sunlight. He slashed at Lomi, but she redirected his blade and it carved through the glass roof. A concussive blast of Force energy shattered the roof, temporarily dropping Jacen into the foliage below.
It didn't delay him for long. He promptly resumed his pursuit, following Lomi into a person-sized hole she had carved in the palace wall. He heard Lomi's rapid footsteps in the echoing hallway and hastened to catch up. As he ran, he took note of the familiar hallway and the direction he was being led to.
She was heading for the throne room.
He turned the corner and saw more dead Palace Guard. The towering doors of the throne room had been blown off their hinges and lay in

pieces on the other side of the threshold. He entered the room without hesitation.
Lomi was there waiting for him, her lightsabers lit and held out to either side of her. He could sense that much of her strength had been expended, however. Her Force presence wasn't nearly as strong as it was before. Which was a relief considering it was still more powerful than most Jedi.
"I'll offer you a chance to join forces with Hapes and the rest of the galaxy," Jacen said evenly, his lightsaber once again clipped to his belt. "With the Killik and galaxy united, we can stop the threat you fear. The Kind has chained itself to a set way of thinking, let others understand what you desire and we'll be able to help."
"*The Kind has heard it all before.* ***She*** *nearly destroyed all life in the galaxy the last time she was free. The only way to deny her victory is to deny her a battle to begin with. This is the only way."*
With an unearthly howl that vibrated her exposed throat tissues, Lomi unleashed a massive storm of Force energy. Purple bolts of lightning rained down from everywhere, blowing holes in the marble floor and arching up to take out chunks of the ceiling. Windows shattered, parts of the ceiling rained down, parts of the floor flew up into the air.
Using his instincts, Jacen darted between deadly bolts of electricity. The closer he got to Lomi, the more intense the lightning storm became. When Lomi realized that the storm wasn't stopping him, her sightless gaze focused fully on Jacen.
She raised her lightsabers again.
But this time it was Jacen's turn to go on the offensive. Faster than humanly possible, he blurred and appeared right behind Lomi, his dust covered face grim. She looked over her shoulder sharply, but he gripped a wrist in either hand immobilizing her lightsabers. A pulse of Force energy rippled from his body and into her, and the lightning storm died away. If Lomi still had her eyes, they would have widened in complete shock.
Her antennae twitched wildly, her head jerking back to face Jacen as she tried to vocalize her question.
In the meantime, Jacen pulled both of Lomi's hands behind her back and produced a pair of stun-cuffs from his robes."I severed your connection to the Force. Lomi is now nothing more than another Joiner."
Before Lomi could formulate a reply in her mind, Jacen activated the 'stun' feature of the cuffs he had just applied to her. There was a small flash, and Lomi dropped to the ground. Fishing through his robes, he procured the anti-Joiner dart Sanix Fous and Sinsor Khal had

developed. Almost anti-climatically he injected the drug into Lomi's unconscious form and used the Force to help manipulate things at a molecular level. As the serum kicked in, he could sense Lomi's last link to the remaining Killiks vanish.
"Now she's just Lomi."
He exhaled slowly, sitting down next to Lomi on a pile of rubble. Hurried footsteps echoed in the hallway.
First through the door was the Queen Mother herself, gray eyes hard, red-braids tied back, and emerald lightsaber ready for a fight. She came to an abrupt stop when she took in the state of the room. Her eyes searched left and right, a look of complete disbelief taking over the normally controlled countenance of the ruler of sixty-three star systems.
"Welcome home, Queen Mother," Jacen smiled lopsidedly. The sound of a good portion of the roof crashing to the floor behind him caused him to wince. Licking his lips, Jacen stood and with a gesture, he floated the throne free of the several tons of debris it had been surrounded by.
"Errr….here's your throne. Just like you left it."
Seeing no danger, Tenel Ka deactivated her lightsaber and raised a fine eyebrow. "I am currently curious about something, friend Jacen."
"Yes?"
"I left you in charge of my palace for a couple of months, correct? A palace I just finished renovating after the last attack on it. A palace I grew up in as a little girl and have very fond memories of. It is a millennia old place, used by every Queen Mother except the one that had it commissioned."
"Yup, it is…errr…was a very nice palace." Jacen winced again. One of the lightning-damaged walls chose that moment to fall away.
"A very nice palace," Tenel Ka agreed, approaching Jacen with slow and deliberate steps. Despite the tone of their words, both he and Tenel Ka had smiles in their voices. After all, it had been over two very long months and a war with the Killiks before they had seen each other last."I am wondering just how is it a poor Jedi like yourself will be able to compensate the Queen Mother for all the damages."
Jacen stepped up close to Tenel Ka, the unconscious Lomi forgotten. "I guess…I'll have to work it off, somehow."
"Perhaps you should start working off the minor transgressions and we shall go from there," Tenel Ka breathed, her lips brushing against Jacen's. Her lone arm reaching around to pull him to her.
"As you command, my Queen," Jacen murmured, before leaning in to kiss her.

As they kissed, they both reconfirmed their bond with one and other, reveling in the rare closeness they shared. When it was over, Tenel Ka simply leaned her forehead against Jacen's chest, her gray eyes closed. Jacen rested his head atop her own, taking in slow deep breaths. They basked in the moment of peace, relieved that the other had made it through the chaos they had faced.
More footsteps, and the two stepped away from one and other, standing side by side.
They still had their duties to perform.
Tenel Ka began giving orders to those who entered the room, coordinating things between the military, nobility, and civilians. Relief crews hustled in, as did more security forces. Tenel Ka's super secretary and bodyguard, Jana, entered carrying Allana.
Jacen gestured to the Jedi Coalition members that accompanied the local forces, directing them to Lomi and receiving reports on the status of things in orbit. He was impassive at the number of casualties, but things had evidently turned out for the better. The Jedi Coalition and the governments that fell under its umbrella had no doubt made their mark on the reclusive Hapans.
And as their duties took them apart once more, Jacen and Tenel Ka shared one last long glance from across the room.
The Battle for Hapes may have been over, but the Swarm War was not.
[.:(Chapter End):.]

Zekk
[.:(I):.]
Zekk had had enough of the freezing rain, of the soggy ground, and the roaring thunder. Zadaria might have been a winery paradise for the Consortium, but he certain wasn't seeing its charms. Not after a full two months of hard warfare against a foe that, unlike himself and the Hapans he commanded, showed no signs of tiring. He didn't think he owned an article of clothing that *wasn't* caked with mud or drenched in the downpours that were common to the planet.
As the chilling winds once against made feeling in his hands and face difficult, he ran a hand over his chin and felt the barely kept goatee that had formed during the campaign. Two months of brutal ground battle, and the only consolation they had was the fact that Tenel Ka had managed to repel the Killik fleet in space halting further Killik reinforcements. She was still battling their attempts, but had established a perimeter that prevented the Killiks from aiding their brethren on the planet. Even then, it was a Killik army of millions versus a Hapan army of a couple hundred thousand.

Their current position was in the shadow of the Zinbar Mountains, half of which was currently obscured by the dark black clouds above. They had gained much ground during the two months, pushing the Killiks back slowly but surely. Approaching the mountain range from three directions, they had used the information garnered from the scouting parties to great effect. In their wake was a great deal of Killik corpses, and it had begun to seem as if the hive mind was incapable of adapting to the non-Hapan strategies devised by Zekk and the Dathomiri Jedi. Casualties had been relatively low, but the past few days had seen a sharp rise in Hapan deaths as they neared their goal. A sharp rise and deaths and constant attacks.

Not helping morale any was the fact that Taryn and Trista's squad was still missing. By now, many had given them up for dead, or worse, Joined. Zekk wasn't sure of either. His Joiner bond with them wasn't exactly the same as a Force-bond, and he couldn't tell one way or the other if they were alive or not. But the red-haired warrior women were the last thing Zekk wanted to think about, even though his forces now occupied the region Taryn and Trista's squadron had disappeared in. Instead, he tried to force his mind back to the matter at hand. Namely holding the forward position which was deep inside Killik territory and under constant attack.

"They're coming again," the Hapan captain beside him noted, watching through electrobinoculars as the Hapan forces once again released a torrent of laser fire.

"They would. We're getting closer to their nesting grounds," Zekk murmured. "If the intel is correct, two of the three queens on this planet are there."

"Our forces are fatigued though," the Hapan captain said softly. "And when Colonel Rais was injured in that last Killik push, that entire flank nearly collapsed. We even lost our shield generators that time."

"If we fall back now, we won't be able to regain the momentum we have." Zekk said with a weary nod. "If we neutralize these queens, then the Killiks in this area will become scattered. We can follow their withdraw to the final queen."

The Hapan captain released a small vaporous cloud of breath. "Understood. But with the Killiks constantly hammering our defenses, there's no way we can advance now."

Zekk gestured to the holo-map in front of them. "Where did Gamma squad say the hatcheries were?"

"Sector Five-Two-Besh. Right where those streams of Killiks are coming from. Three or so day's walk normally, but it will probably take our army another month or two to reach it. The main passages are the

caverns within those mountains so our fighters can't get to it and our artillery is ineffective. Any further and we'll have to forgo our armored support."
As the captain spoke, a flight of Hapan E-wing fighters roared overhead. The fighters unleashed several spherical objects that detonated in the middle of the Killik charge. A crackle of light and suddenly the Killiks were engulfed in a raging inferno. After another few seconds filled with flaming Killiks recklessly advancing, the Killiks withdrew, and silence fell once more.
"Receiving reports, another dozen killed."
Zekk absently stroked his goatee as he pieced together the options available. Finally he nodded. "You're right in that holding this ground will be too costly, and we won't win if we advance either. I'll take a team and personally seek out these Killik queens. In the mean time, the rest of the forces here are to pull back to these locations."
The captain looked to the indicated regions. "Sir, that's nearly twenty kilometers away."
"But they are defensible positions that will allow everyone to hold out indefinitely," Zekk said. "Anything before that is open field or woodland, too hard to hold in this weather."
"We won't be able to provide support if anything happens. And you have not just those caves to search, but the valley between the mountains as well."
"I know," Zekk said. "But it's either me and the Dathomiri Jedi go in, or this army here gets picked apart with bug-bites. And, as you said, the weather and constant attacks are wearing us down."
The alarms in the perimeter fence went off once more, and another wave of Killik unburrowed themselves and began firing their projectile weapons. Immediately, automated turrets responded, strafing the area with thick bolts of green. Backlit by a flash of lightning, one Killik leaped into the air above the tracking radius of the turrets and landed on a turret. It planted an explosive and then leaped off just as the device shredded the turret. One of the Hapan soldiers fired at the Killik, only to be picked off by a Killik sniper with a shot to the face. As the Hapan forces rushed to meet the new threat, Zekk shook his head.
"Do you have any better ideas, captain?"
The captain shook her head.
"I definitely could use a second opinion. But with Major Vessau back with the fleet and Colonel Rais out, we seem to be short on that. I guess my crazy idea will have to do."
"Your orders, then?" the captain said professionally.

"Have the Dathomiri Jedi meet with me, but get everyone ready to fall back."
"Good luck sir." In the background the Killiks were launching their third attack in the past half hour. This time swarms of blast and blaze bugs buzzed angrily out of the distant cave openings. The Hapan forces frantically fired at the approaching cloud of deadly bugs, another hail of laserfire pouring from their defenses. Flamethrowers were brought out, gouts of blue flame flaring in the steady rain and engulfing entire segments of bugs. But some got through, blowing holes in barricades or troop formations.
"Get them moving, captain," Zekk said solemnly. He handed her a datapad with a series of orders. "You'll know if we Jedi are successful if the Killiks withdraw from this location."
The captain saluted, then hurried off to inform the communication's center of the new orders.
In the meantime, Zekk waited where he was on the low knoll, rain continuing to soak his Jedi robes and chilling his pale skin. Another fork of lightning temporarily made the tops of the mountains visible in jagged silhouette. He hated the planet and most likely would have an aversion to wine thanks to the miserable wet mess he was in.
When the next Killik attack subsided, the Dathomiri Jedi led by Sanola Ti made their way to him.
"Having fun?" Zekk asked wryly.
The bedraggled and mud covered team of Jedi smiled back in turn. Rajade chuckled. "Could be a little drier."
"Could be a lot drier," Sanola muttered, glaring at the dark sky.
"Makes home truly seem arid," one of the Nightbrother twins, brought up in Nightsister Queen Ros La's desert compound, said. The Zabrak's tattooed and bare muscular torso was covered in rain drops that glimmered in the flash of another bolt of lightning.
"We got a little bit of what you had in mind from that Hapan captain," team Jedi sniper Ijun said in his usual soft-spoken voice. "But were unclear about the details."
"Relatively straight forward seek and destroy mission," Zekk said. He pointed to the distant mountains. "We're going to seek out the two queens intel has confirmed to be in the area and either convince them to stand down or put them down. We'll be able to move much faster if we don't have to drag the army with us."
"So just us against a million or so bugs? Great, love the idea," Rajade rubbed his hands together to bring back some warmth to them. "Let's get started."

"The decision is up to Commander Ti," Ijun said calmly, looking to the red-haired Dathomiri warrior woman. "This *is* her command after all."
"Like she's going to back down from this," the other Nightbrother twin rolled his eyes. He held up a hand and lightning crackled across his fingertips. "Come on, I'm itching to show these bugs what happens when they try to fight the boot above them."
Zekk glanced at Sanola, the group's leader, to see how she would react to the obvious dark-side sentiments being displayed, but to his surprise the Dathomiri Jedi patted the Nightbrother's arm sympathetically.
"Make sure you save some for me, brother."
Zekk changed his gaze to the others, but they all seemed to be in agreement, once again making Zekk wonder just what the Dathomiri were being taught at their Praxeum. Though he had worked with them for the past two months, they still continued to surprise them at how 'dark' their actions and comments became. Yet, they all seemed to be devoted to the light side as well, never crossing that line that would make them 'dark' Jedi. How they did so with ease, did so and made it seem natural, once again was evidence for Zekk that dark actions could be done for right reasons and turn out for better in the end.
"The rest of the army is going to stage a fighting retreat, drawing the Killiks with them. We'll be staying behind and then head into Sector Five-Two Besh for the hatcheries when the Killiks pass us by. The Force will guide us."
Sanola briefly checked in with her group with a visual sweep and then inclined her head to Zekk. "General, my people are ready."
The perimeter alarms went off once more, this time a giant beetle creature was crashing through the defenses like a rampaging Reek. Laserfire splashed ineffectively against its armor plating as its large tusks cleaved the perimeter fence in two.
With a small sigh, Ijun unslung his sniper rifle from over his shoulder and took aim. After another few seconds of rampaging, Ijun let lose a maser bolt that blew through one of the beast's eyes and came out the other. The massive beetle swayed for a second, then collapsed where it was. "Are we sure the Hapans can hold without us?"
"They'll step up," Zekk nodded. "And when we take out the queens, their chances will be even better."
"The sooner we accomplish this, the sooner we can get off this puddle-filled rock," Sanola said. "We'll get our gear and meet up with you in ten."
"Here's to hoping I haven't just Anakin'ed us," Zekk muttered when the group began to head towards the supply tent.
"Huh?" Rajade looked over his shoulder.

Zekk waved at him to continue "Hunting queens in enemy territory, not exactly good memories."
"We're on this rain-drenched ball of mud, wasn't exactly expecting to have any good memories," Rajade quipped. "Apart from stepping on the ramp of a shuttle as I finally leave this place."
"Get going," Zekk rolled his eyes. "And lets see if we can't make it to that shuttle after this."
[.:(II):.]
The mountain trails were slick, as expected, and narrow. They were also relatively uncared for since the Killiks preferred tunneling through the soil far below. It had taken Zekk and the Dathomiri Jedi the better part of the week to get through the winding network of caves and pathways. In that time they had seen countless waves of Killik warriors empty the underground passages en route to the Hapan positions in the far distance. But now, as they rounded the final bend, they were able to see the valley sheltered by the Tinbar Mountains.
Row upon row of agricultural tracks were overgrown with lush, green plant-life. A roaring river cut through the center of the land, its waters almost as black as the night's sky above. There were several villages scattered throughout the valley, the occupants having long been made Joiners, no longer lived in the simple houses within. From above, the valley looked almost tranquil. And if it wasn't for the giant spires of the Killik mounds bordering it, people would have had a hard time seeing anything wrong.
"Bug central," Rajade murmured, wiping his face of the most recent rainfall. Jedi cloaks could only ward off so much water before becoming sodden.
"The queens are definitely somewhere down there," Zekk murmured, feeling the distant murmuring of the Joiner-meld tug at his mind. "In one of those spires."
"If we call in pin-point air or orbital strikes…"
"No, Davin," Zekk cut off the Dathomiri Jedi. "The queens are most likely underground. Even with an orbital strike we can't guarantee a successful kill. If the queens escape, we'll be back to square one. Over a dozen Hapans died tracking these two down, so let's not waste their efforts."
"So," one of the Nightbrother twins snorted. "You want us to go down there, into one of those hives, and take out the queens personally?"
"First of all, we have to figure out which one of those hives," Zekk grimaced.

"That's over a hundred kilometers of valley." Sanola stared stoically out at the fog-shrouded valley. "And who knows how many bugs are still down there."
"Good thing we packed for a long trip." Rajade gestured to the meager rucksack on is back.
"The Joiners would not have gone far from their Hapan houses," Ijun said in a whisper. "Their attachment, what makes them valuable to the Killiks, will also make the Killiks value what they value. Killik larva need food, and as we have seen these past months, they have acquired a taste for Hapan flesh."
"That is just disturbing, Ijun," Davin shuddered. "You make it sound like the Hapans have become cattle, farmed and kept content until the slaughter."
Ijun's expression was shielded by the Kalish warmask he wore, "An apt analogy do you not think?"
"No," Davin rolled his eyes. "I don't want to think about it."
"So the queens will most likely be with the larva, who in turn will be with a great deal of Hapan Joiners," Sanola spoke evenly. "And these Joiners will most likely be kept in a place close to where they lived as individuals to keep them satisfied."
"The nearest village is empty," another one of Sanola's Dathomiri Jedi said. The teenage Zabrak was scanning the nearest settlement through a pair of electrobinoculars. "And so is the one a little further down."
"Probably already eaten everyone inside," Ijun offered, causing several in his squad to shudder and glare spitefully at the sniper.
"Then we keep on going until we find a village that isn't empty. We can take a break and stock up on supplies when we pass through the second village," Zekk gestured to the empty village. "I don't think the Hapans will be needing them."
Thunder rumbled above, but fortunately for the Jedi, the dark clouds held their rain and continued to drift past.
"Thank the Force," another Dathomiri Jedi murmured, voicing everyone's relief.
Zekk smiled faintly and briefly peered over the edge of the narrow walkway they were on. "Looks doable."
"Thank the Force," Rajade mimicked, before giving everyone a casual salute and leaping off the edge. He shot down like a rock and landed on a ledge much lower with a resounding thud. The Force kept him from any injury and he cheerfully waved back up at the others.
"Sometime I want to kill that man," Sanola grumbled, shaking her head and leaping down after him.

Zekk followed suit, the team of Jedi forgoing climbing gear and letting the Force be their ally. From their new landing, they leaped down to another lower elevation, and then another. A couple of Sanola's team decided to gravel surf, round pebbles and rocks acting as ball-bearings and taking them down the mountain side with pinpoint Force-control. Descending a mountain that would take normal people at least a full day or two, the Jedi team made it to the bottom in less than ten minutes.

Shrouded in their Jedi robes like wraiths, they shot out away from the shadow of the mountain and towards the distant cluster of houses by the raging riverside. The sodden ground splashed at their rapid footsteps, their prints disappearing almost as soon as they were made. Tapped into the Force as they were, they could feel all sorts of life surrounding them, from the plants to the seemingly infinite number of Killiks, the valley was far from dead despite its seemingly empty state. Almost as if confirming that the Jedi weren't alone, they could hear insectoid clicks and clacks echo off the surrounding mountain walls. The Jedi pushed on in absolute silence, even though the hour was late and their bodies were exhausted. Traveling several days with only a brief moment of Force meditation to restore their bodies would take its toll on any Jedi. By the time they reached the second empty village that had been at the range of the electrobinoculars, they looked forward to a good night's rest.

But as they approached the village through a field overgrown with thorny berries, Rajade stepped on something metal that emitted a clicking whine.

"Oh shi…" the blast sent Rajade flying backwards, his leg a mangled mess but his life protected by the Force.

Though what had just happened shocked the Jedi, they felt a surge of danger in the Force and hastily dove out of the way. A flurry of plasma projectiles blazed out of the direction of the village, lighting up the night air in storm of yellow bolts, cutting neat holes through the fluttering Jedi robes from near-misses. Another explosion in the ground sent a second Dathomiri Jedi flying amidst burnt plants and clusters of mud.

Realizing that they were in a minefield, Zekk stood his ground, his lightsaber snapping into existence and parrying two bolts of molten metal fired at him with crackling hisses. The red glow lit up the night and was soon joined by the colors of the Dathomiri Jedi. The minute the last saber sprang to life, however, the plasma fire immediately died off. A tense silence followed, the plants in the field around the Jedi smoldering from the plasma barrage and mine explosions. The air full

of the smell of smoke and burnt foliage. Several of Sanola's team began checking on the injured members, while the others cautiously kept their guard up.
Then a voice Zekk hadn't heard in two months, a voice he had almost believed he wouldn't hear again, came out of the darkened village in a whisper that only Force-sensitive ears could pick up.
"Zekk?" It was hopeful yet disciplined at the same time. As if the speaker wasn't about to let herself get tricked into giving herself away.
"Taryn," Zekk whispered in disbelief, his eyes growing wide. The hand holding his lightsaber going slack. He debated whether or not to reach out with the Force, but didn't want to get his hopes up. He took a step forward and a bit louder called out. "Taryn?"
Another silence followed.
A lone figure stood up from between a gap in the circular cluster of houses, the exact shape shrouded by a ghillie suit. The figure shrugged off her cover, but the lack of moon and starlight kept anyone from seeing who it was.
In the meantime, Zekk's heart was pounding loudly in his chest as he resisted every urge to rush to the figure. He didn't need to see her face to know that she was Taryn Zel, of the Royal Family. He could *feel* it. His feet coasted him to the front of the Jedi line, the red glow of his lightsaber illuminating the path before him. Taryn, in the meantime, likewise took steps towards him, seemingly on autopilot.
When the light of his saber finally reached her and shined on her camouflage-painted face, Zekk felt as if his beating heart would thump right out of his chest. Tired gray eyes sparkled with delight and mischief, the corners of her mouth twitching as she fought back a grin.
"Taryn," Zekk finally breathed.
"Zekk. I'd hug you, but I don't want to impale myself on your lightsaber," Taryn quipped, her body a coil of energy despite the exhaustion evident on her gaunt face.
Zekk immediately deactivated his lightsaber, and Taryn was in his arms a split-second later, fiercely hugging him and trembling all the while. Zekk could only close his eyes, relief coursing through his entire being as he held the both of them up. The warmth of her body, the strength of her hug, everything about her just kept Zekk holding on in turn, not willing to lose her again.
Taryn was alive, alive and in his arms. No amount of R and R could replace that feeling.
"You okay?" Zekk muttered.

Taryn just shook her head and continued to hug him tightly. He looked around at the Hapan commandos emerging from their cover and noticed a glaring absence.
"Trista?"
"Bugs have her," Taryn whimpered softly.
Zekk felt the pressure return to his chest and glanced in the direction of the distant Killik mound. "How long?"
"Almost a month now," Taryn replied, she tilted her head back up to Zekk. "We'll save her, yeah?"
"No doubt," Zekk said, brushing her paint-covered cheek with the back of one of his hands. "The rest of the squad?"
Taryn's face fell at that and she rested her head back on the crook of his shoulder. "Four dead. Lieutenant Lovett was captured with Trista. We also need your Jedi magic to fix up two others who are badly hurt."
"You have any med-supplies for our injured?" Zekk asked.
Taryn nodded. "Our injured have internal bleeding. We managed to cauterize the severed arteries but...none of us are doctors. We only have field-aid training."
"Then Lieutenant Irina," Zekk closed his eyes, pained as the fate of the squadron's medic was clear. He rested his head atop Taryn's, once again thanking the Force for helping her survive for so long.
"Dead," Taryn answered softly, her hands gripping his Jedi tunic tightly. "We were trying to break the Killik lines and get back to the Hapan front for help."
"Well, help is here," Zekk rubbed her back and used the Force to inject her with strength, even though he himself needed a good rest. "We'll do this together."
"Together," Taryn breathed. She took a step back, remembering to be embarrassed as she glanced back towards the village. "Guns down, he's definitely House Zel's personal Jedi."
Zekk looked back to the Jedi and deadpanned. "We found the lost Hapan squad."
"Sorry about the whole minefield and shooting at you thing," Taryn said with a wince. "We're near the hive with the queens and thought they had sensed our intentions and launched a pre-emptive attack."
"Sensed?" Sanola stepped forward, her hands covered in Rajade's blood. Rajade himself was lying on the ground, one of Sanola's torn sleeves used to tie off his leg and stem any blood flow.
"Yeah," Taryn nodded, resting herself against Zekk's side. "Everything was going fine until a month ago. My squad and I remembered what Zekk taught us back on Relephon, how Jedi can sense threats to them. We figured Force-sensitive bugs wouldn't be any different. So long as

we kept our intentions benign, the Killiks wouldn't sense us, or care if they did. All we did was keep track of the Killik queens' movements and nothing else. No intention to attack, no intention to hurt the hive. Then four weeks ago, the Killiks suddenly got agitated, whole swarms poured out of the hives. Trista and her half of the squadron were trying to keep tabs on one of the queens and were cut off…."
Zekk felt Taryn tremble, so he gently looped an arm around her. "We'll get Trista and Nyrani back, Taryn. Promise."
Taryn swallowed and took a deep breath. "Yeah."
"The upsurge in Killik activity was probably our fault," Sanola said carefully. "It was at the start of the month that we began an artillery barrage on the caves leading to their hatcheries. It was around that time that the Killiks also began launching their incessant attacks on our lines as well. Are you certain your sister is still alive?"
"Saw her from afar," Taryn said emotionlessly. "She's…Joined. Zekk's going to need to do his Jedi thing to make her head right again."
"Well that and the new and improved anti-Joiner serum," Zekk said. "Is this village a safe place to rest? The Dathomiri Jedi and myself have been on the move for almost three days straight."
"It's as secure as we could make it," Taryn said. "Even has warm beds and showers, just try not to think about what happened to the people who used them before you."
"Okay," Sanola inclined her head slightly. "We'll help your wounded and then bunker down for the night. We'll plan the rescue tomorrow morning."
"Appreciated."
[.:(III):.]
Sleeping on military cots with the occasional draft of cold wet air wafting through the tent had become the norm for Zekk for the past couple of months. Sleeping in a warm room on a comfy bed, not so much. The hot shower and meal had been a welcomed reprieve from the harsh reality outside, but given how his mind was still racing with the news that Trista was in peril, Zekk wasn't surprised that he only got a few hours of sleep.
He slipped out of bed, briefly glancing out the window to see that the month-long storm was abating. The sky was still dark, but between the Transitory Mists and the first rays of sun, was a lot brighter than pre-dawn on most worlds. The house he was in was a five-room, one-story structure, part of a dozen or so houses all clustered around a giant berry-press in the center of the village. Dust-covered bottles of stormberry wine were lined up in neat rows on the shelf, the labels indicating vintages that went decades back.

He could feel Taryn still sleeping in the adjacent room, and moved as silently as he could to give her the rest she truly needed. It still amazed him how she and her sister had managed to survive for so long so deep behind enemy lines, and a part of him blamed himself for giving their squad such a dangerous assignment in the first place.
In search of an early-pre-dawn snack, he made his way into the main sitting room. It had been late when he had finally allowed himself his brief nap and he hadn't had a chance to look around the dwelling Taryn had appropriated. As he took note of the many objects in the house, he saw a holo-recorder device set up on the dining-room table, a datacard already inserted.
Curious, he made his way to the device and pressed 'play'. A holographic image of Taryn appeared over the projector, looking wan and defeated.
"*This message is intended for General Zekk of the Royal Hapan Army. In the course of a single day, our squad took fifty-percent casualties. Food and medical supplies are low, ammunition nearly depleted. We are not sure how much longer we can hold out. It is likely that you are reviewing this after discovering our bodies. We have uncovered intel that we cannot let the bugs know we have, so if it comes to it, we will take our own lives than become Joiners. Attached is the datafile containing the coordinates the Killik queens most frequent. It is our hope that you finish what we started and take out those bugs. The Hapan Consortium only has enough room for one queen after all.*
The rest of this message is for Jedi Knight Zekk, the personal Jedi of the Noble House Zel." Taryn's mouth twisted into a pained smile, eyes entreating for forgiveness. "*I'm sorry I couldn't make it back, Zekk. Me and Trista really tried, and I really wanted to give you more time, but you know how unfair this galaxy is. Don't...don't blame yourself or think that either of us died loving you any less than we do. I..."*
Zekk shut off the projector and closed his eyes, his chest tight once more. Using several Jedi breathing exercises, he managed to calm himself. Forgetting his previous efforts to let Taryn sleep, he slowly made his way over to her room, not bothering to hide the emotions he was feeling.
Pushing the door open, he entered and knelt at her bedside. Gently, he brushed a few strands of red hair from her face and planted a soft kiss on her lips. He then pulled back and was about to stand, when he heard Taryn shift in her bed.
Her gray eyes opened slowly. When they focused on him, she reached up, grabbed a handful of his Jedi robes and pulled him back down for another searing kiss.

"Good, it wasn't a dream," Taryn exhaled when their lips parted. Keeping a hand cupping her cheek, Zekk smiled tenderly. "Sorry, I didn't want to wake you."
Taryn's sharp gray eyes explored his haunted face. "What's wrong?"
"Nothing, just glad you're alive," Zekk said.
Taryn blinked very slowly, then looked over Zekk's shoulder and saw through the open door the holoprojector out on the table. Understanding dawned and she leaned forward and kissed him again, but much gentler this time. "Of course I am., Jedi Knight Zekk. Don't pay any attention to that silly recording, I had brought the projector out to delete it. I made it right after my squad took those casualties and had Killiks coming in on all sides. At the time I thought Trista had been one of those killed. Wanted to make a just-in-case vid…you know…to let you know how much I lo…"
Zekk pressed his lips back to hers, and Taryn lightly tugged at him until he was in the bed with her. When their lips parted, both were breathing heavily, their eyes focused on one and other and hands cupping each other's faces.
"I love you Taryn Zel," Zekk whispered, realizing that as he spoke the words, he meant it more than he ever had in his life. He drew upon his strength, willing her to feel his emotions for her through the strange Joiner-bond they shared. He felt a surge of warmth in turn, and knew that Taryn was reciprocating his feelings.
"I love you too, Jedi Knight Zekk," Taryn whispered, gray eyes full shining with trust and vulnerability wrapped up in one. She shifted, snuggling against him and hugging him close. "Stay with me the rest of the night?"
"For as long as you want me by your side, I'll be there," Zekk murmured solemnly, rubbing her back.
Taryn nestled herself into him and drifted back to sleep.
For his part, Zekk held her close, breathing in her scent as he did. He felt his own exhaustion slowly take him, the feel of Taryn tucked against him soothing him more than he thought possible. In her absence, he truly realized just how much the fiery and intelligent woman in his arms meant to him. Kissing the top of her head one last time, he let sleep take him, knowing that the next day would be a busy one.

[.:(IV):.]

"You see, right on schedule," Taryn said with a cocky grin. She and Zekk were hunched behind a rocky outcropping, a winding mountainous road below. Two days of planning was about to culminate in their biggest gamble yet. "It's just like we observed. The Killik alpha

queens alternate their visits to each hive, and spend a day or two with each then leave in the afternoon. They never visit the same hive together, but often combine escorts when they travel. We think they use the surface roads and not the underground tunnels because of the large number of Joiners escorting them. Chiri says the Zadarians always enjoyed the smell of the air after a heavy rain, and given how most of the planet was Joined, the bugs probably inherited that enjoyment."
"I see them." Zekk kept his focus on the mass of Killiks and Joiners scuttling down the pathway. One large group of Killiks was coming up from one fork in the path, and a second group was coming up another. Noticeable was that half of each group was made up of Hapan Joiners.
"And there's my sister," Taryn murmured, her hand clenched around her blaster pistol. "And Nyrani."
"There has to be close to two-hundred Killiks in each group."
"We're lucky. When you guys attacked, it was easily a thousand each. We lost count after five-hundred."
"The Killiks think the threat is more distant. With Trista and Nyrani Joined, they know your supplies are running low and can't threaten the hive."
"There's the signal from the others," Taryn said, resting the barrel of her blaster pistol on her forearm to steady her aim.
"Guess that's my cue."
Zekk gestured with his hands, and the two large boulders they were using as cover shuddered, then rose up into the air. With a thunderous crash, they proceeded to bounce their way down the mountain-side, combining with boulders hurled by the other Dathomiri Jedi. The avalanche immediately blocked off the path before the choke point, trapping each group of Killiks and Joiners in their own separate channels.
Specialized gas grenades provided by the Dathomiri Jedi were then lobbed into the Joiners of both groups and went off in dozens of clouds of blue. More lethal grenades were hurled at the Killik portion of the group in combination with a flurry of plasma-fire from the surviving Hapan commandos.
The hive-mind was immediately thrown into chaos. The Killik's first instinct was to protect their queens, but that decision was made harder when the hive-mind realized that the queens weren't being targeted. More boulders came crashing down, wiping out groups of Killiks at a time. The last of the Hapan mines were also detonated, sending bug-bits flying every which way.

The dozens of larger Killiks escorting the queens leapt into action with lethal-looking staff weapons, bounding up the sides of the mountains almost as easily as the Jedi had descended them. Solid streaks of yellow and blue blazed out from higher up in the mountains as both Ijun and Hiana opened fire. The larger Killiks' carapace offered little protection to the armor-piercing rounds, and the charging Killiks were easily picked off.

More Killiks charged, clambering over the bodies of their brethren in an attempt to overwhelm the attackers with their numbers. The longer the battle stretched the more organized the hive mind became. Several reached Hapan-Dathomiri positions, but the pairs of Jedi—each guarding a Hapan commando—repelled the attacks with either waves of Force energy, or body-rending Force screams.

The Killik queens began to retreat back down the path they came, only to find more boulders blocking the way. The Killiks that had followed the queens soon found themselves bearing the brunt of the sustained surprise attack. Never could the hive-mind had fathomed that a team of Jedi would link up and revitalized a decimated commando squad like they were doing now. And with that oversight, and the assumptions of the Joiners who supplied most their information, the Killiks were paying dearly for it.

Within a matter of minutes, the nearly four-hundred strong force of Joiners and Killiks had been all but neutralized by the eighteen-strong Jedi-commando unit. Joiners by the dozen lay on the ground, unconscious and chemically muted from their link with the hive. Killiks lay scattered, burnt, and in all manner of dead, parts strewn about the two narrow passage ways.

The two queens were still living, but now immobilized and sending out no signals thanks to the Dathomiri Jedi—who were accustomed to taming wildlife back on their homeworld.

"Trista," Taryn knelt by her sister's unconscious form, pressing a finger to her twin's neck to find a pulse.

Zekk knelt down next to the two, placing a hand on Trista's forehead and using the Force to determine what was happening. After a minute, he exhaled. "She'll be okay. The serum is taking effect."

"Good," Taryn breathed in relief. In the distance, both Ijun and Hiana had abandoned their perches and were rejoining the group. Everything appeared to be settling down when the Jedi felt a small burst of alarm.

"Over here!" One of the Hapan commandos called out, her plasma-rifle raised.

Eyes were drawn in the direction she was indicating, and they could see three Joiners taking cover behind one of the boulders that had landed in the path.
"Easy," Zekk called back, leaving Taryn to take care of her sister. He steadily approached the Joiners, his lightsaber clipped back to his belt. "Come out."
The Joiners did as bidden, the trio blank-faced and black-irised. One, an older gentleman dressed in ragged clothing, continued to walk towards Zekk. In a raspy voice that seemed not to have been used in a while, he spoke. "Why do you attack the Kind? We are trying to better the galaxy, to save it. You are a Jedi, you understand that."
"You can't save people if they don't want to be saved," Zekk said calmly. "Do you speak for the queens here?"
"The queens," the man turned his blank gaze onto the immobilized giant Killiks. "You must release them. We need them to continue our hive."
"If we do not?"
"Then another will be grown to take their place," the Joiner replied mildly. "And you will have earned the enmity of our hive."
"You're already trying to kill us, to Join the entire consortium, what else would you do?" Rajade snorted. His leg was in a medical splint, but he had refused to be left behind.
The older Joiner showed a brief twitch of annoyance. "We will not explain ourself to you. Join us and learn the truth of this galaxy for yourself."
"No thank you."
"Surely you can see that the galaxy is destroying itself because of what you are doing," Zekk pressed. "Whole worlds are dying, are suffering, because of the actions of the Killiks. How many Hapans on this planet were killed because of your invasion?"
"Insignificant," the Joiner said sharply. "Insignificant to the number of Hapans that would die should eternal night fall. You don't know the true power of the dark side."
"Every life is sacred," Zekk said coolly. "As a Jedi and a rational being I cannot sacrifice lives just to advance some agenda. No matter how few or many, every life is irreplaceable. Just because there's a chance they might die later, doesn't mean they should be killed now. Your hives are destroying this galaxy, leaving it in a state that will take many, many years to recover from. In that time, more people will suffer, more people will die, and the darkness will become that much stronger."
"That is preferred," the old man's voice remained firm. "Because as you said, the galaxy will eventually recover, a decade, a century, the

darkness will not last. But should the sleeper awaken, *she* will usher in a darkness that will take millennia to recover from. She will snuff out stars, leave planets barren, devour the life-forces of billions in her reign. The Kind does what it must to keep her from awakening, and if keeping the galaxy devoid of light keeps her slumbering, then so be it."
"You see this?" Taryn approached the Joiner in a casual saunter that hid her anger. In one hand she held a datapad. "This contains coordinates to the hive's hatcheries, to their key structures. You creeps had my sister's mind linked with yours, you know what that entails. Tell your forces to stand down or our fleet in orbit will deliver precision strikes to these coordinates, and your hives won't have to worry about a future, light or dark, because you'll be dead here and now."
"We do not command all Killiks on this planet. The Kind is both unified and separate."
"That's okay, we know where the last queen is anyways," Taryn said.
The Joiner was silent for a long moment.
"Well?" Taryn folded her arms in front of her.
The Joiner's face became twisted with rage. "Just as you threaten our home and young, we will do the same to yours. Our fleet might not be able to break through your lines, but that only means the throne is unguarded. We have sent our fleet to Hapes to annihilate everything there. If we die, you will too!"
The Joiner lunged at Taryn, but was caught in a Force hold. A anti-Joiner serum dart was quickly administered to him and the other two.
"Hate to cut this short, but our motion sensors just picked up a whole lot of bugs heading our way," Chiri Aros said, hefting a rotary cannon.
"What do we do with the queens?" Another Hapan commando asked.
"We can't take them along."
Sanola answered the question, her lightsaber activating. "I believe your Crown Princess said it best. Hapes only has room for one queen. They evidently chose to attack instead of surrender. Their last mistake."
The Dathomiri Jedi hurled her liquid-yellow, Ssurian-tooth lightsaber with practiced accuracy, lopping off the heads of both queens in a single toss. Even before the heads landed on the ground, the group of Jedi and commandos could hear a deafening, enraged shriek sound up from every corner of the valley.
"Sanola!" Zekk groaned. The Force began a non-stop pounding that warned of the danger rapidly approaching. The ground began to shake, bits and pieces of rock vibrating and bouncing back and forth. The team looked at one and other and quickly gathered up Trista and Nyrani and took off in a fast run.

"Well, they know where we are, might as well re-activate our comms now are call for an evac," Rajade said glibly. "And transmit those firing solutions too."
"Good idea," Zekk nodded.
Rajade continued to sprint with the rest of the group despite his still mending leg, the pain he was feeling being channeled into energy that sustained him in another display of a dark-side ability being used for beneficial purposes.
"Neat trick," Zekk noted, keeping his senses extended all around them. The enraged shrieks continued, making the entire valley sound alive with indescribable rage.
"Learned it from the Nightbrothers," Rajade quipped. "Never thought I'd have to use it like this though. It's very draining in other ways, but I'd rather not be bug-chow."
In the meantime, Taryn ran alongside the pair of Nightbrother twins who were supporting her unconscious sister between them. She had her comlink out and was rapidly relaying a series of instructions while gasping for breath.
"The Queen Mother is no longer in orbit!" Taryn called out. They cleared the mountains, but still needed to outrun the mass of Killiks now streaming from the adjacent Killik mounds. "She took a portion of the fleet back to Hapes!"
"What about the rest of the fleet?"
"Engaging a portion of the Killik fleet that stayed behind. I have a Nova-cruiser, *Jewel of Novi,* trying to maneuver into position for pinpoint orbital bombardments. Only thing is, we just ran into the coordinate location of two nearby hives."
"And the Killiks have encircled us," Sanola gestured to where the Killiks were now leaping across the river to trap the team in a pincer movement. The group skidded to a stop, wearily forming a circle as a seemingly ocean of Killiks began to swarm all around them.
"So much for becoming disorganized with the death of their queens." Chiri groaned. She glanced at the power meter of her rotary cannon, then discarded the weapon with a small pout and pulled out an over-sized blaster pistol.
"Taryn," Zekk said slowly, meeting the eyes of the other Jedi and receiving acknowledgement of his plan. "Tell the *Novi* to commence with their bombardment. Bring it right on top of us if you have to. You and the Hapan commandos get behind the Jedi. We have a plan."
"Getting blasted by our own people isn't exactly a good one," one of the commandos muttered, rolling her eyes but following Zekk's instructions.

"This will work, trust us," Zekk said. Then, in a much lower voice muttered, "I think."
"Well, whatever you have planned, you might want to implement it. Orbital strike in five…four…three…" As Taryn began the countdown, the Killiks continued to fill the area at the base of the mountain, none of them seemingly at all happy.
"One, zero."
Right on cue, Hapan turbolaser batteries unleashed a rapid discharge of speeder-sized laser bolts down onto the planet. Groups of Killiks dozens strong were instantly vaporized by the shafts of red light. The nearby towering Killik mounds also proved to be vulnerable to laser fire, bursting apart at the seams and turning into blazing infernos of dirt and biomass. Boulders as big as a house burst apart after being flash-heated to millions of degrees in fractions of a second. The torrent continued, Killik mounds up and down the valley being systematically wiped out with precision fire.
The Jedi and commando position wasn't immune from the indiscriminate bombardment either. The cloudy gray sky lit up in a flash of red, the only warning of an incoming turbolaser. Though the Hapans all flinched, expecting imminent death, the group of thirteen Jedi all held up their hands towards the oncoming beam of energy. The Force flowed through them, unifying them in thought and purpose and allowing them to pool their already considerable strength.
The red beam lanced down faster than the average eye could follow. Then, as if hitting a prism floating above the group, splintered outwards into dozens of smaller streams of lethal energy. Like a surge of red liquid being poured down and splashing off an impregnable roof-top, the laser flared outwards in a multitude of directions and left the group unscathed. Another turbolaser bolt, same result, though this time a couple of the Dathomiri Jedi fell to their knees in exhaustion. The two splintered turbolasers, however, proceeded to wipe out any Killik in the group's immediate region. Fortunately, thanks to Taryn's hasty berating of the turbolaser techs through her comlink, the barrage seemed to pass them by shortly after; continuing to lay waste to the nearby Killik mounds with impunity.
"Well," a pale and sweating Rajade panted. "That was energizing."
"Shut up," Sanola muttered. With the threat past, she fell to her knees as well, sweat pouring down her face. She cast a wan look at the group leader. "Jedi Knight Zekk, you'll forgive me if I say that that was the most insane thing I've done since becoming a Jedi, and I've done quite a few insane things since leaving Dathomir."

"Right," one of Sanola's squad agreed. "Who in their right minds would try to deflect turbolaser fire in the middle of an orbital bombardment?"
"We're lightyears from home, fighting giant bugs. We're not in our right minds to begin with," another Dathomiri Jedi said with a tired smile.
"The Killiks are scattering," Zekk said softly, watching the sea of Killiks wither and die under the orbital strikes. Many tried to disappear underground, but the turbolasers were throwing up huge tracts of land all around the Killik mounds.
"For now at least, we have a fighting chance," Chiri replied grimly. "We still have one queen and another mountain of bugs to track down. We only saw the third queen once in this area while we were scouting, so we're not sure where it would be now."
"We'll worry about that in a little while," Zekk said. "For now, let's just get back to base and spread the good news. Our job just got two-thirds easier."
[.:(V):.]
A shuttle-ride back to the command base was followed by a supervising of the clean-up operations in the region. Taryn, Trista, and the surviving members of their squad were given medical leave, though they had to stay planet-side because the situation in orbit remained complicated.
Though the Hapan fleet had prevailed, the Killik fleet had resorted to suicidal charges and managed to crash a dozen of their ships into the planet. Who knew how many Killiks survived the impact, and what kind of damage these additions could do. But their additions had been confirmed by scouting units, once again increasing the odds for the ground forces. The fleet itself had been split up by Tenel Ka, and those remaining in orbit had been battered pretty badly by the desperation maneuvers employed by the Killiks. It was clear that unless the last queen was found soon, the Hapans would soon find themselves overwhelmed.
There were several leads in the search for the last Killik queen. Chief among them being that every single Killik appeared to be withdrawing from throughout the planet and heading towards the Zadarian steppe far from both the Hapan army and the hatcheries of the two now deceased queens. Now it was all up to General Jedi Knight Zekk to determine the next course of action.
"General Zekk, sorry to wake you but…wha…wha….whoa," recently promoted Sergeant Chiri Aros had pushed aside the flap to his tent and promptly forgot how to speak.

"Sergeant, this definitely isn't what it looks like," Zekk jerked to a seated position, saying his words quickly even as the bed-sheet pooled at his waist to reveal a bare, muscular torso.
"Zekk?" Taryn, who had been sleeping on his right shoulder, stirred in discontent at the loss of her pillow.
"It's just Sergeant Aros," Trista said, her eyes still closed. Zekk's sitting up had blocked her from Chiri's view, but the Hapan commando was now keenly aware that Taryn and Zekk weren't the only ones in the cot.
She was also aware of something else as Zekk's movement had disturbed the sheets and showed that both Zel twins had only towels wrapped around them.
Chiri's jaw moved open and close several times, her eyes bulging. She had been holding a datapad up upon entering the tent, but that arm now was slack at her side. The other arm was extended outwards, dumbly pointing at the scene before her.
"Really," Zekk said hastily. "Nothing happened. They were just tired after showering and fell asleep."
"In your cot?" Chiri said with disbelief.
"Yeah."
"Just wearing towels?"
"Yeah."
"And nothing happened?"
"Yes," Zekk said in exasperation.
"You mean to tell me, Wonder Knight Zekk, that you had two beautiful, nearly naked Hapan women crazy for you in your bed last night and *nothing* happened?"
"Errr….yeah?"
"Are you even into women?"
"He is, trust me," Taryn said impishly, placing a hand strategically over the sheets still covering the lower half of Zekk's body. "Unfortunately for me, he's too noble to act on those baser urges of his."
"Unfortunately," Trista deadpanned, opening one eye. "What time is it? The sun's not even up yet."
"Right," Chiri shook her head as if to clear it, glanced back at where the half-naked Zekk was still sandwiched between the two towel-wrapped Hapan warriors, and had to shake her head again. "The Queen Mother is calling for General Zekk on the Priority-One relay. Apparently we're all being recalled."
"What?" Trista woke up fully, rubbing at her eyes. "There's still hundreds of thousands of bugs on this planet."

"Like I said, the message is for General Zekk. I'm just a lowly sergeant, Lieutenant."
Trista grimaced at her new rank. "You're dismissed then, lowly sergeant."
Chiri snapped off a sharp salute. "Sir."
When she left, the trio groaned. Zekk just shook his head. "What are you going to bet that by sun-up the rumors we'll hear will be sordid and raunchy, and perfectly untrue."
"We'd be brain-dead to take that bet," Taryn shook her head. She reluctantly slipped out of cot and stepped behind a changing screen set up in the corner of Zekk's tent. "I can talk with our cousin, Trista, if you still need more time with Zekk."
Trista's eyes fluttered close again, her breathing hitching for a brief moment. "No, I can last the day."
"You were Joined to the hive-mind for nearly an entire month," Zekk said gently. "I may have healed a part of your mind last night, but minds are very complicated. There's no telling what other hidden damage the Killiks might have caused. Don't force yourself to do more just because you feel like it's your duty."
Trista just smiled faintly. "Don't worry, Jedi Knight Zekk. I will be fine."
"It's my job to worry about the two of you," Zekk muttered, giving her an affectionate squeeze.
Trista placed a brief kiss on his lips and then rolled out of the cot. "That's why we can do what we do. We know we have you looking out for us. We already owe you a life-debt several times over."
Zekk began to get dressed as well, collecting his clothing from the chair at the foot of the cot. "Just continue living, being yourselves, being happy. That's all I want back from the two of you..
A couple minutes later, and the trio emerged from the tent fully clothed and ready to battle whatever the day was going to throw at them. And apparently, the word had already gone out that the three had shared a cot because Zekk could detect a myriad of surface thoughts from the soldiers on duty. With one of his hands wrapped around Taryn's side, and the other over Trista's shoulders, the image certainly didn't do anything to dispel whatever story Chiri had spread.
"If Chiri ever gets stranded behind enemy lines again, remind me not to go rescue her," Zekk deadpanned.
"Want us to really embellish her story by kissing you out here in the open?" Taryn said playfully.
Zekk gave her a brief kiss on her forehead and shook his head. "I wouldn't want to force Trista to do anything she's not comfortable with."

"I wouldn't mind," Trista said mildly.
"See," Taryn said cheerfully. "Come on, these soldiers have to be bored stiff, standing out here in the cold, camp air, with not even a single Killik attack to get their blood pumping."
"I have to talk with your cousin, remember."
"Fine, rain check. We'll go oversee the readiness of the forward lines. Just because the Killiks haven't attacked these past few days doesn't mean that an attack might not be in the works," Taryn said. "Good luck with our cousin."
Zekk just had to shake his head as the twins sauntered off towards the front of the Hapan base.
"How do you do it, sir?" A Hapan soldier asked nervously, approaching him when the Zels were far out of hearing range.
"Huh?" Zekk turned to see a male, Hapan private looking at him almost worshipfully.
"To bed the both of them and keep them satisfied the entire night? Does being a Jedi really help your stamina that much?"
Zekk closed his eyes, silently counted down from ten, then used the Force to try to calm himself when that failed. He smiled tightly, pinning a glare at the command tent. "If you'll excuse me, private, I need to have a word with Sergeant Aros."
"O…of course, sir."
Sensing that the bold private wasn't the only one in awe with whatever reputation Chiri had built for him, Zekk did his best to keep from blushing as he stalked towards the command tent. Standing just outside the flap, he heard Chiri speaking.
"He'll just be a moment longer, your Majesty. Like I said, I found him in bed with your cousins, clothing suspiciously absent." There was a pause as Tenel Ka responded. Then Chiri continued to talk. "Well, they both looked at peace, *chume*. Given the hell we escaped from, I'm surprised that they could bounce back that quickly. You wouldn't mind prescribing me a Jedi of my own, would you?"
Zekk brushed aside the tent-flap and cleared this throat. Chiri jumped slightly and looked over her shoulder.
"Oh, and here he is."
"Chiri," Zekk folded his arms in front of his chest.
Chiri grinned mischievously. "Yes, general?"
"You know what."
"All I did was mention in passing to a concerned healer that she didn't have to worry about the Royal Zels. That they had spent the night with you and had very pleased smiles on their faces this morning. When the

healer asked if they had picked up the new uniforms, I just mentioned the state of dress I saw them when I left your tent."
"And this healer would have been, where?"
"The mess hall. Frankly I was surprised by how many people are up at this hour too," Chiri shrugged. "Think of it as being good for morale?"
"Good for morale?"
"You're the first male, Hapan general who's just scored the death blow against the Killiks on this planet. You're a paragon Jedi who has the affections of two very attractive, unattached members of the Royal House. Won't hurt the males in the army to know you're good in the sack also. That way they can all attempt to emulate your prowess, and that will lead to a lot of happier females in the army."
Zekk fought back a groan, wondering how these things ended up happening. "You're dismissed, sergeant."
Chiri saluted sharply. "Yes, sir. Hope you like the improvement to your storied reputation, sir."
"Go," Zekk shook his head, smiling in surrender as he did.
Chiri left the tent, leaving Zekk to look at the hologram of an amused Tenel Ka in exasperation. "Tenel Ka!"
"I *can see you have things well in hand over there*," Tenel Ka said dryly. "*And from what I hear, you have my cousins well in hand as well.*"
Zekk face-palmed. "Please tell me that was a joke."
"*It was,*" Tenel Ka looked pleased that someone could understand her humor.
With a rueful sigh, he looked back to the Queen Mother. "Sergeant Aros told me, you're pulling all the Hapans out of Zadaria?"
"*That is correct. With the capture of Lomi, Jacen has been able to usurp her hold on the Killiks in the Hapan system. We are hoping that with the help of the Dathomiri Jedi, we can extend Jacen's reach to the Killik strongholds throughout the Consortium.*"
"Great, when do we leave?"
"*The others will be leaving as soon as the transports are loaded. You, however, will be staying on the planet to act as Jacen's conduit. You do still feel the effects of your Joining, do you not?*"
"Yeah."
"*Then that will be of great help. The other Dathomiri Jedi will be dispatched to systems with confirmed Killik queens and perform a similar task. It is our hope that Jacen can either convince the Killiks to leave, or at best at least cease hostilities.*"

"Is Jacen certain he can convince the Killiks here to stand down?" Zekk frowned. "Because if we leave the area, it'll be a pain to retake the planet."
"*Jacen has already convinced the Killiks in the Hapan system to lay down their arms,*" Tenel Ka replied. "*And though he knows that each hive has its own temperament, he's counting on the other hives to form a consensus. We're aware that the Killiks believe some great evil is approaching, and Jacen is trying to convince the Killiks that they can't stop the great evil if their numbers are all killed off in a war.*"
"One other thing….your cousins. You know they'll protest me staying here by myself."
Tenel Ka allowed herself a small smile reserved normally for her close friends. "*Unfortunately for them, I will have to make their leaving with the fleet an order. The rest of the fleet will be returning to Hapes to rearm, resupply, and relax as they prepare for their next great assignment. I will not lie, my friend. There is a great danger in the plan, but the chance for peace is just as great. When your task is done you can rejoin them here at Hapes. Think of this as a request from me, not an order.*"
"Hey, if you and Jacen are sure there's a reasonable chance for this to work, I'm onboard," Zekk said, acknowledging her show of friendship with a smile of his own. "Been a while since I participated in one of his Solo-style plans. Kind of missed the insanity."
Tenel Ka shook her head in amusement. "*Thank you, Friend Zekk. Hapes…I…am in your debt.*"
"What is it with your family and debts," Zekk said wryly. "I'm fast considering the Consortium to be home, it's only right I do my part in keeping it together. I'll contact you again when the fleet's moved out."
"*Understood…and good luck.*"
"All I'm doing is letting Jacen use my senses from halfway across the Consortium to talk to a bunch of space-bugs bent on murder and chaos."
"*And if things go wrong…*"
"They won't, I trust you guys."
Tenel Ka inclined her head, and then reached over and ended the comm.
Zekk sighed softly, rubbing his newly shaven chin in thought. His understanding of the Force had been kind of turned on its head thanks to his close work with the Dathomiri Jedi and Taryn's own opinion of things. Who was he to doubt whether Jacen could pull off what was seemingly impossible for most Jedi? Then again, Zekk mused, Jacen was hardly like 'most Jedi'.

In the first place, Jedi normally didn't have a kid with the regent of sixty-three star-systems, become Senator for the order in a galactic government, and command fleets.
Then Zekk reflected on his own situation. Jedi normally didn't date princesses, command royal armies, and act as a conduit for a trans-system Force conference call. Chuckling softly to himself, he left the communication's tent and saw that the order to pack up was already being spread around.
His red-haired warrior woman…*his*? He blinked at that thought, then shrugged and decided to roll with it. In the past few months, that was hardly the most shocking thing to cross his mind. And he was quite sure Taryn had claimed him in a similar manner…and that was even before they were officially together. Taryn was gesturing to a group of soldiers loading up crates onto cargo lifters, professionally directing them with all of her usual military discipline.
He briefly used his Joiner link to sense that Trista was in the communication's tent, no doubt talking with Moreem on the med-ship in orbit. Since receiving her injury at the beginning of the campaign, the squad's leader had received a mechanical leg to replace the one she had lost, and had been rehabbing. Despite her progress, it was clear she wouldn't be able to remain on the elite squad with such a debilitating injury. Something that frustrated Moreem to no end. Trista's absence had also severely affected Moreem's mental state, and the two had been in constant comm-contact since Trista had returned.
Zekk took one last look around the camp that had been his home for the past week, at the people who had fought with him for nearly two and a half months and had become like family. All good things had to come to an end. The dark clouds boomed over head, making Zekk revise his thoughts. Glancing back towards Taryn, he couldn't help but smile. Maybe it was a good thing they were leaving, and that the good times were just starting.
[.:(VI):.]
Zekk watched the last of the Hapan shuttles, the one carrying Taryn and Trista, disappear into the cloud-bank. He had shared a heated goodbye kiss with Taryn and a heart-felt hug with Trista, both reminding him that they would be 'most displeased' should he decide to get Joined once more. But with them gone, and he left standing on a flat of black rock, he was now the only non-Joined being on the planet. Or not….
Stretching out his senses to get attuned to the planet, he detected two people who weren't supposed to be on the planet.

"Chiri…Hiana," Zekk spoke in disbelief, turning around.
Both commandos sheepishly deactivated stealth-fields and reappeared behind him. They were armed to the teeth, wearing the latest body-armor and looked ready to take on armies all by themselves.
"It's not our fault," Chiri said hastily. "We received orders from Lieutenant Zel to stay behind and guard you with our lives."
"Truly," Hiana nodded in support.
"And they weren't really disobeying orders. The Queen Mother ordered *them* to return…"
"Chiri, I can understand you following orders, you're a sergeant. But you Hiana? You're a lieutenant grade higher than Trista."
"No comment, sir," Hiana replied, her face betraying nothing.
"You two sure you want to stay?"
"Someone has to watch that scrawny backside of yours while you commune with nature, Wonder Knight," Chiri said. Strapped to her back was her portable, stripped down turbolaser cannon.
"Lieutenant Zel said I am in charge of unit morale," Hiana said, sounding dubious. She reached out and her collapsible, armor-piercing, plasma sniper rifle unfolded with several mechanic clicks. "Should any harm come to you, unit morale would be affected negatively. I cannot allow that."
Casting his gaze skyward where the Zel's shuttle had disappeared, Zekk could only shake his head ruefully. "Alright then, welcome aboard you two. Hopefully, if things go well all you'll be doing is watching me sit and medita…Is that a holo-cam?"
"So the rest of the royal guard has a better understanding of what the Force does," Hiana said guilelessly. "Ladies Zel wished to be here personally to see the Force in action, but this is what they were willing to have instead."
Zekk once again wondered about his new 'home' but smiled nonetheless. "Okay. But unless you can feel the Force, you probably won't see much."
"Orders are orders," Hiana shrugged, as if she wasn't disobeying one from the Queen Mother herself.
"Well then, come on. We have a long walk ahead of us." No sooner had he spoke than a rumble of thunder filled the sky and rain began to fall once more. "And the sooner we get there the better. I've had enough of this planet."
"I did too," the Zadarian native quipped. "Why do you think I became a commando?"
"Better choice in the quality of men?" Hiana deadpanned.
"I don't like you anymore, lieutenant."

"Doesn't matter, I still outrank you."
Zekk just sighed. "This is going to be a very long walk."
The time went by quickly, the two commandos actually falling quiet as they approached enemy territory. The few Killiks they did see scurried out of the way rather than engage, making the trip surprisingly uneventful. Finally, they reached their desired location. After setting up the holo-camera, Hiana vanished in search of a high vantage point, while Chiri unslung her turbolaser cannon and began to assemble it. Zekk pulled out his comm-link. It was linked to the ship in orbit, which in turn was linked to a series of relays that would allow communications to reach Hapes through the radiation-heavy Transitory Mists. "Tenel Ka, I'm in position at the entrance to the third queen's territory. Sentry Killiks in the far distance, Joiners too."
"Understood."
Zekk felt something in the Force and held up his comm again. "Please be advised, I think this queen is Force-sensitive, Force-aware at the very least."
"*Even better.*" This time it was Jacen's voice that emerged. "*I'm going to drop into deep meditation over here, prepare to do the same and open your Joiner bond to the fullest.*
Zekk found an outcropping of rock and sat down on it cross-legged. With practiced ease, he breathed out and let his mind go blank as the Force coursed through him. At the same time, he also tapped into that small portion of his mind that remained connected to the Joiners. After several seconds of balance, Zekk felt Jacen through their bound forged by friendship and the events on Myrkr. If words could describe it, Zekk felt like the afterwash of a ship's engine next to the blazing sun that was Jacen's Force presence.
Zekk then realized that the reason why Jacen seemed much more powerful than himself was that the young Jedi was embracing both the light and dark sides of the Force, was truly one and in balance with the Force. Reflecting once more on his experiences with the Dathomiri and Taryn's words, Zekk took a deep breath and made a choice. Nervously at first, like a child taking his first steps, Zekk tapped into that well of darkness that he kept locked away. He could feel the rage, the jealousy, the desire, tucked away, simmering and ready to welcome him like a long lost friend. At the same time, he kept himself serene, acknowledging those baser feelings but not succumbing to them. The time ticked by, his link with Jacen growing stronger as Zekk's Force presence became closer aligned to Jacen's dual nature.
Welcome, Zekk sent, grinning at his personal victory.
Hello, Jacen sent back.

"Zekk," Chiri said nervously. In the distant cave opening, a stream of Killiks began to emerge.
Stay calm, Sergeant Aros, Jacen's order through Zekk caused the Hapan commando to jerk in surprise.
"How…I hear Jedi Solo's voice in my head!"
Stay calm, Jacen repeated. *Killiks can detect emotional states. If you mean to do them harm they will attack.*
Chiri looked dubiously at all the weapons she had on her. "Errr…Jedi Knight Solo sir. I can't exactly say I've come in peace."
Jacen, however, had already turned his attention to the Killiks on the planet. Zekk could feel the younger man's thoughts, could feel him use the Joiner bond as a short cut to the queen still hidden inside the network of caves. Giving Jacen access to his own strength, Zekk marshaled his thoughts and began to aid Jacen in linking to the Killik hive mind. As the two combined their efforts, Chiri gasped.
"Wonder Knight…you're ummm…glowing."
Zekk didn't reply, his own thoughts focused on the multitude of minds the Joiner bond connected him too. Though the hive he had originally Joined was still back on Denon, the Killiks as a whole were one giant consciousness. Millions of thoughts, experiences, lives, they flew by in a rush, the lives of all the Joiners on Zadaria experienced by the entire hive. They were the surface thoughts, the values of the Joiners whims of the hive. Jacen took the both of them deeper into this mind, leaving the experiences of the Joiners and delving into the experiences of the Killik drones and guards.
The Force continued to pulsate and shine, the Force balancing between light and dark, emitting from Zekk in visible waves of wind.
More Killiks began to emerge from the cave, these one a lot larger than the first groups.
Royal Guardians, Jacen noted. To the surprise of the Hapan commandos, his ghostly image appeared directly next to Zekk's seated form.
"Jedi Knight Solo?" Chiri managed, her jaw going slack.
"Hey, Sergeant Aros. Congratulations on your promotion," Jacen smirked, a golden glow flickering around his image. "I can see Tenel Ka's cousins found a loophole in her orders again."
"Errr…yeah. How are you here?"
"I'm not really here," Jacen held out his hands on either side of him. "I'm just using the Force to project myself here with Zekk acting as my anchor on this planet and Tenel Ka as my anchor on Hapes. A little trick I learned from the Jensaarai that requires both light and dark in equal parts."

"Whatever you say." Chiri saw the bugs advance and tensed.
"Relax. I'm letting the queen know I want to talk," Jacen said. "She seems open to that now that the army is off-planet."
"Easy for you to say," Chiri grumbled. "You're not actually here."
"Tenel Ka did want you to return with the rest of the army," Jacen chided lightly. "Look, here comes the Killik queen."
In the distance, a Killik much bigger than any of the others before her emerged from the cave. She was easily three-times taller than the average human, with mandibles as long as a human's arm. Surrounding her were a retinue of Hapan Joiners, looking absolutely tiny in her massive shadow.
"The other two queens were nowhere near as big," Chiri breathed.
"They were for creating more Killiks," Jacen said. "She's their mother."
"And you know that, how?"
"She just told me," Jacen smiled faintly.
The procession of queen and Joiner made their way to the hill Zekk and Chiri were on, stopping only a few meters away.
"Greetings, queen of the Rekker hive," Jacen inclined his head politely. "I am Jacen Solo, and I represent the Royal House of Hapes and all her territories."
The chorus of a dozen Joiners spoke in unison. "We welcome you, Jacen Solo. We thank you and the Queen Mother for the cessation of hostilities on this planet."
The queen towered over the trio before her, but Jacen showed no sign of being intimidated. "Would you withdraw from this system without further conflict? We know the Killiks seek to stop a great evil from coming to the galaxy, but that job will be impossible if they lose too many of their kind. Withdraw and Hapes will ensure you safe passage out of the Consortium."
"We cannot agree to those terms," the Joiners voiced. "This is our home."
"The home of your Joiners?"
"Yes, they are one with the Kind now. They have no wish to leave the Consortium and neither do we."
Jacen raised an eyebrow. "Would the Killiks be willing to acknowledge Tenel Ka as the regent of the system then and cease aggression on non-Joined planets?"
"You would allow us to stay?"
"There are many unoccupied worlds in the Consortium, on behalf of the Queen Mother, if it means an end to the fighting, we are willing to let the Killiks move to these planets. There is one condition though, should any of your Joiners not wish to remain Joined, you are to free them."

"The Joiners are all of one mind now. They all know the peace the Kind brings them."
"Look into their memories, their thoughts. If you think they would have willingly chose to be Joined, you may keep them. If not, please free them. The Zadaria system was allied fully to the Queen Mother, you know that your Joiners would not wish to weaken her reign any further. We will not act aggressively towards the Killiks unless in self-defense, if you agree to our terms. If not, Killik and Hapan will fight, will die, and the great evil you fear will grow that much stronger with our deaths. You can feel the truth of this in my words. I want not your death, not the destruction of the Killiks, but an ally to fight against this evil. From what I've learned, the Killiks have no chance against this evil by themselves, so join forces with us to keep that evil at bay."
The hive-mind seemed to make up its mind all at once. "We will be allowed to live and grow?"
"Only on the planets we provide, no further," Jacen answered evenly. "The Consortium is large enough for all of us, but you have to respect the laws and rules of those who already live here. Once you free the Joiners who are not part of you by choice, we will allow the Rekker hive and those allied to Rekker to move."
The Killik queen made several clicking sounds with its mandibles, her head bobbing and weaving. A wave of Force energy radiated out from her, distorting the air. After a moment, nearly her entire retinue of Joiners dropped to the ground unconscious. The few that remained standing showed emotion for the first time, looking sad at those who lay on the ground.
"It will take time to release all those who do not wish to enjoy the peace of the Kind," the remaining Joiners said in unison.
"Understandable, thank you. Will you be able to talk with the other hives as well? A Killik fleet still engages the Corellians as we speak."
"They are Mueum and Togot, we do not speak for them."
"Of course," Jacen inclined his head. "I thank you for coming to this peaceful solution, queen of Rekker."
"Without the Joiner once called Lomi, Rekker and many other hives are now free to choose their own path. The Kind only wants to live and grow, but we will do so just as the many who have Joined with us wish."
Jacen blinked once in affirmative. "Aid ships will begin arriving within the day. Queen of the Rekker hive, can you send any more people who wish to be unjoined to Zadaria's capital. The facilities there should help better care for them."
"We will. Will you allow vessels of the Kind to land so Rekker can begin evacuating the planet?"

"We will," Jacen said. "And you will agree to acknowledge Tenel Ka as regent of these systems, support her reign?"
"So long as what she does does not harm the Kind, we do."
Jacen bowed. "Then we have an accord. Thank you."
The Killik queen made another series of clicks and growls which Jacen seemed to understand. The queen then did her best imitation of Jacen's bow, and began to retreat back towards the tunnels.
"Then that's it?" Chiri let out quickly, seemingly remembering that she needed to breathe. "It's over?"
Jacen smiled. "It's over. See you back on Hapes."
Jacen's image closed his eyes, and he seemed to vanish with the next cold breeze that washed over them. With Jacen gone, Zekk opened his own eyes. He felt a strange sense of peace, a residual echo from the Joiner bond he shared coupled with his finding balance in the Force. It was a feeling he wasn't used to be definitely didn't want to reject.
"What now?" Chiri asked.
From his seated position, Zekk tilted his head back up to the tall Hapan woman. "We take care of these ex-Joiners until the aid-transport get here. Then we go back home to Hapes."
"Sounds good to me," Chiri nodded. She touched the subdermal comlink by her left ear. "All clear Hiana."
Several minutes later, while Chiri and Zekk were gently arranging the dozen or so freed Joiners as comfortably as they could, Hiana emerged . "Mission accomplished?"
"Yes," Zekk said. "For us at least, the Battle for the Consortium is over."

[.:(Chapter End):.]

Corellia
[.:(I):.]
"All hands, brace for impact!" The shout across the intercom system competed with a volley of explosions ripping across the blackened armored hull of the Corellian dreadnaught the *Halcyon.* That wasn't what the warning was for.
Three Killik capital ships, blazing and at death's door, decided to end their lives by plotting collision courses directly into the Corellian's pride and joy. As the prows of the three vessels slammed into the hulking mass of Corellian engineering, the *Halcyon* shuddered violently and the people within were thrown left and right. Then the drive-cores of the Killik vessels detonated, ripping apart decks and leaving gaping holes

where millions of credits of weaponry, technology, and lives had once been.
"Damage report!" Valin Horn snapped, blood trickling down one side of his face as he picked himself off the debris-strewn bridge floor.
"What isn't damaged!" Jysella called back. As one hand gestured outwards, the other was rapidly flying over a control console, frantically diverting power from the now destroyed sections of the ship. "If you want a status of this ship look out the mag-con field."
His sister was gesturing to the hole in the bridge caused by a Killik boarding missile—an armor-piercing tube filled with assassin bugs that had killed most of the original bridge-crew including the Corellian Admiral Karathas. Now it was the two of them plus a handful of replacements trying to pilot a ship normally controlled by nearly two-dozen people. Alema was also onboard, but in her case she was in the main battery trying to get the surviving gunnery crews to fire with Force-enhanced synchronization. Something that actually got easier over time as the Killiks destroyed turret after turret.
Valin used several Corellian curses he knew even his mother would disapprove of and pulled himself to one of the few working terminals. The Corellian fleet was being massacred, though it wasn't entirely their fault. Since stumbling onto the hidden Killik fleet on Relephon, an initial skirmish had evolved for over two weeks into a full-fledged fleet-to-fleet brawl. Unfortunately, the Killiks outnumbered the Corellian expeditionary force with odds most Corellians wouldn't ever think about taking. Especially since the fleet hidden on Relephon hadn't been the only one. What the Killiks lacked in coherent strategy and advanced technology, they made up in overwhelming numbers. The sensors had indicated that the dozen and a half-strong capital ship fleet of the Corellians was facing over two-hundred and fifty Killik capital ships.
But the Corellians could scarcely run. Their ships were blocking the Killik's path to dozens of un-Joined worlds. Completely defenseless worlds given that the Royal Hapan Navy was already engaging smaller Killik fleet-groups in several other systems. Over the course of those two weeks they had been steadily pushed further and further back out of the system, until they were now fighting to hold the very edge of it. Trickery, clever moves, mental manipulation, and a whole lot of luck had gotten them through it thus far. But it looked like their luck was about to run out.
"Blast it!" Valin yelled after the blaring alarms. "Is Natua and Tiu done with their stint over Hapes yet?"

"They have ground forces! What use are they going to be against those bugs!" Jysella called back.
"More targets for them to shoot at!" Valin retorted. He glanced towards another battered Corellian officer. "Our weapons?"
"We've lost sixty-percent of our turbolaser batteries, the bugs are making suicide runs in an attempt to knock them out!"
"Wonderful. And what about the Royal Navy, this *is* their turf we're dying for!"
"Transitory Mists prevent outgoing comms, we don't know if they're even coming!" Another officer called back.
"Abso-kriffen-lutely wonderful," Valin spat. "And someone kill that blasted alarm!"
"The *Silence* has just fallen!" The Bith officer in charge of checking on the status of the Corellian ships reported as the console before him showed a Corellian frigate break up.
"Forget about the *Silence*!" Valin barked. "We're about to lose the entire fleet! Have the fleet come about to point three-seven-two. We'll use the *Halcyon* as a giant sponge and soak up the enemy fire. Get the others out of here. If the Hapans don't want to defend their Consortium, we're certainly not going to do it for them."
"Detecting a new fleet of ships emerging from hyperspace!"
"If it's more bugs, shoot me," Valin deadpanned.
"They're Hapan, sir!"
"Our-side Hapan or bug-Hapan?"
"Unknown, wait…receiving a hail."
"Put it through."
"*This is Duch'da Aleson Gray, commander of the Fleet of Her Glorious Defender Queen, calling from the Battle Dragon Kendall. You Corellians look like you could use a hand."*
"Nah, we have everything under control," Valin said snidely. Another explosion caused the holographic image of the well-dressed Hapan commander to flicker. "This is a good day for us."
"*Then I would hate to see a bad day,*" Aleson remarked. "*Have your ships continue their present headings, Her Majesty's Battle Dragons will cover.*"
Valin quickly relayed the orders then looked back to Aleson's holo.
"There are a lot of bugs out here, how many ships are in your fleet?"
"*The Fleet of Her Glorious Defender Queen normally has fifty Battle Dragons and twice that in Novas when fully staffed.*"
"Why does that not sound good," Valin groaned. "I take it you're not fully staffed at the moment."

"*Do not fear, we are twenty Battle Dragons and thirty Nova-class battle-cruisers strong. More than a match for these primitive insects.*"
"Great, now we can all die in greater numbers," Valin rolled his eyes. "Using the Force I've been able to pinpoint a flagship with several Force-sensitive individuals on it as well as a Killik queen. At least I think it's a queen given the impressions I'm sensing. Only problem is that the vessel is well behind the Killik line, and we have no way to reach it without blowing us all to bits."
"*Let the Fleet of Her Glorious…"*
"No I won't let you be the spear-point," Valin quickly cut the man off as he read the man's thoughts. "Even if you have to repeat that fleet name over and over again. If we charge into the Killik fleet we'll get torn apart. *You* might want a glorious death in the name of your Queen Mother, but I prefer to stay among the living."
"*Very well, then my forces will instead form a protective screen so your own may withdraw. You know as well as I that we cannot let the Killiks leave this system. More vessels of her Majesty's navy will be arriving when they can. But until then, we will have our work cut out for us."*
"No kidding," Valin gritted his teeth.
"*May the Queen Mother smile on us this day as we fight in her name!*"
The holo ended and Valin just shook his head. "Where does Tenel Ka find these people?"
A Verpine technician looked up. "The Hapans are moving between us and the Killiks. The Killiks are still too numerous, the *Cyberviri* was just deleted by that last missile barrage."
Emphasizing the report were several more smaller explosions that reverberated through the structure of the dreadnaught.
"How's our engines?"
"Clusters Three through Five are out. Minimal power for Cluster Six. Clusters One and Two are still functional."
"When you say out, are the drive cores gone too, or just functionality?"
"Four and Five lost all power. Three's core is functional, but the Killiks rammed the engine block rendering it inoperable."
"Great," Valin looked at those in the flaming and ruined bridge. "Slave all controls to this console, then give the order to abandon ship. Our shuttles and remaining fighters can move faster than this slug."
"Sir," the officer being addressed saluted sharply and then proceeded to carry out the command. Alarms began blaring loudly through what was left of the ravaged superstructure of the Corellian dreadnaught.
"Go, Sella," Valin ordered.
"Valin," Jysella glared.

"Go! Follow orders for once, damn it!" Valin snapped, not caring that he could feel hurt echoing through his frail sibling bond.
Jysella whirled back around, storming off after the rest of the bridge crew.
Valin turned back to the control panel before him, the automated processes registering the launch of escape-pods and any space-worthy vessel still onboard. In the background, the holo-comm unit exploded in a shower of sparks and flames, a segment of the dreadnaught spinning off into space.
Piloting the dying vessel as best he could, Valin re-activated the comm-system. "Duch'da Gray, I'm currently in control of one hell of a mobile missile. The external sensors are out, however, so I need a location. Where do you want me to aim it?"
"*Down their throats would suit us just fine, Jedi Horn.*"
Valin's eyes scanned the flurry of motion in the battlefield before him. "Mind clearing a lane then, keep the bugs' mouth open?"
"*It would be my pleasure.*"
The force of ships Aleson brought with him began a concentrated firing effort, releasing turbolaser barrages, missiles, torpedoes and all manner of weaponry as if they were going out of style. Bug vessels by the dozens succumbed to the sudden barrage, leaving a temporary field of debris where a wall of Killik capital ships had once been.
Pushing all power to the engines, Valin inputted the last set of coordinates the *Halcyon*'s navi-computer would see. Like a battering ram, the disintegrating behemoth of a ship surged forwards, pushing aside anything in its path. Valin settled back into the captain's chair, a wry smile finally gracing his features. He couldn't help but feel relief, even as the ship hurtled towards its doom with him aboard. One way or another, it would all be over.
"Interesting plan, almost Solo-worthy," Alema's voice from right behind him nearly gave Valin a heart-attack.
"Alema!" He leapt out of the chair.
"Why do people keep looking so surprised when they see me?" The blue Twi'lek sauntered through the ruined bridge.
"You're supposed to be on an escape pod."
"Well, it was either me or your sister. And I had to knock her out, so that just left me."
"Get out of here. I ordered everyone to abandon ship."
"Hmmm….nope. I'm not Corellian Navy, or Jedi, so I'm not in your chain of command."
"Look, I have a duty to get the Corellians who came with us back home. Someone has to make sure the ship detonates at the right

moment. Otherwise the bugs will just swarm through the nova and kill everyone."
"You know, why is that *always* the consequence of failing?" Alema tisked. "We either do what we do or everyone dies. We *need* to lighten up. Well, actually, you do."
"We have less than ten minutes before we reach the optimal location. Get out, Twi'lek."
"Well, *human*. How about no," Alema gestured, and Valin found himself lifted into the air with the Force. She suspended him over the chair with minimal effort, casually looking over a burnt out console and ignoring him. "You know how scary it is, me seeing myself in you?"
"Put me down."
"Wow, you really are into giving orders aren't you Colonel Horn?"
Alema's head snapped back around and a yellow-irised gaze glared up at him. "For once, you are going to listen, and listen good. You don't think I know what you're feeling? What you're hiding from your sister and everyone else? Hate, loathing, and regret, and it's not directed at anyone but yourself. You hate what you've become, hate the Vong War for making you the person you are today, and hate living but are too proud to end it all. Did I get it right?"
"We're on a ship about to explode in the middle of a space battle, this really isn't the best time." Valin replied testily, glaring at the Twi'lek holding him in the air.
Alema ignored him of course. "You see, I felt what you did once. Back during the Vong War, I was nothing but a walking, blazing great big ball of hate. Anakin and Tahiri saved me from myself. Made me realized that there was more to life than revenge, than living for the sake of killing the guys that wronged me. It's okay to have that darkness within you, regardless of what the Jedi say. What's not okay is letting that darkness rule your life. You've tried chems, you've talked with people, saw Jedi mind healers, and none of it worked, right? Well, I'm going to offer you another way to deal with it. One that won't rid you of the guilt and your misplaced sense of duty, but will help you use them to become even stronger. But it will be hard, it will be painful, and it definitely won't be for the faint of heart."
"I'm not saying I agree, but what method would this be?" Valin said, his emotional armor cracking a bit at Alema's analysis.
"It's simple. There's an academy for Force sensitives not run by the Jedi who specialize in dealing with the hell you've made in your head. You're going to go there and emerge a new man."
Valin let out a dry laugh. "You want me to become a dark Jedi?"

Alema wagged a finger as she walked around him. "No, I want you to become Valin Horn again. Whether you become a dark Jedi is entirely up to you. After all, it's not the techniques that make one dark, but how they're used. You as an expert investigator should know that."
Another part of the ship crumpled under Killik laser fire, but the large engines of the vessel kept it surging forward. The two inside the bridge ignored their burning world, the distant echoes of metal twisting and buckling, the galaxy seeming to have shrunk to the few meters of metal deck they occupied.
Alema idly ran her hand over a burnt out console. "It's up to you, Colonel Horn. I'm offering you a way to stop those nightmares, a way to stop seeing the faces of those who died in front of you. That empty feeling in your chest, the feeling of never being whole again, I'm offering to fill it back up again. Of course, you can always stay and die here, but that's a wholly stupid idea. It would mean everything you went through, all the pain and suffering, meant nothing at all. That in the end, you *weren't* strong enough to make the difficult choice of continuing to live. That you weren't worthy of the Horn name, of being called a Jedi, of the trust all those men and women under your command placed in you."
"Enough," Valin said. Unlike before, his voice had grown soft. "Enough, Alema."
"Your choice," Alema looked up to him. Explosions flared all around the *Halcyon* illuminating the bridge in bright flashes of light. Again they went ignored, Valin hearing only the pounding of his heart thudding loudly in his ears. "We have what, five minutes now? What will it be?"
"Damn you," Valin spat.
"Already damned," Alema said with a sarcastic wink. "Come on. You haven't even sunk as low as I did. I *know* you want a way out. I'm giving one to you. Take it."
Valin swallowed heavily, looking everywhere but at the Twi'lek who could see through him so easily. "Fine."
"Hmmm?"
"Fine! I'll try it your way, now set me down!"
Alema flicked her wrist, and Valin was deposited unceremoniously onto the floor. "Great. You know you'll have to let your family think you're dead. Can't have them tracking you down."
Valin nodded solemnly. "I'm already dead. Won't be too hard."
"Now let's get off this ship before we're actually dead."
"Just let me set the timers," Valin whirled back around as the rest of the galaxy seemed to come back into focus. "You do still have a way off?"

"Yup, the local Sith Lady operating in the cluster," Alema said with a smirk. She was disappointed, however, when the comment barely fazed Valin. "We're going to hide in one of those blast-proof cargo crates and launch ourselves at one of Relephon's moons. Said Sith Lady will pick us up when she receives my signal."
"Are you sure? You Sith aren't really known for helping each other out."
"I'm kind of the favorite lightning rod for her boss," Alema said, holding up her scarred arm. "She wouldn't deprive her boss the pleasure of killing me, she'd get into all sorts of trouble."
"Can I just mention that you Sith are *really* screwed up?"
"Like you aren't?" Alema replied, leaning against the door jamb. "We now have about a minute and a half to race through what's left of this ship, you done yet?"
"Done, let's go!"
Even as the decks began to buckle, the bulkheads collapsing, and the atmosphere venting in great gushes all over the ship, the two Force-users ran as if their life depended on it. Which, their lives probably did considering the ship was now being blasted apart by over five dozen smaller ships.
"Seventy seconds!" Alema called out with maniacal laughter. "Now this is fun!"
"I still don't see what my sister sees in you."
Alema grinned over her shoulder. "I don't either. When you come back from the dead, have a talk with her would you? I'm going to get her killed one of these days."
"She won't listen to me. Can't you tell her to stay away?"
"She won't listen to me either," Alema replied. "You Horns are annoyingly stubborn."
A blast took out a large section of hallway in front of them, atmosphere spewing out into the void of space in a violent decompression.
"Now what!" Valin yelled, grabbing onto a metal girder and fighting to keep his feet on the deck.
Alema reached into her utility belt and fired a piton through the hallway. "Grab on!"
Valin let himself fly a little ways down the hallway and latched himself onto the Twi'lek. She then let the piton yank them over the gap and into a more stable section of the ship.
"Forty seconds."
"Cargo bay this way!"
They scrambled around the next corner and into the next room. The chaos had spilled cargo bins all over the place, the contents spread out in a mess all over the floor.

"That one!" Alema gestured to a massive cargo crate the size of a small shuttle labeled '*Spydersloth Industries'*. It was already lined up to the cargo-bay's airlock and open for their use.
"You have to be kidding," Valin blinked. The crate she was gesturing to was labeled 'spare shield generators'.
"No time." Alema gestured and unceremoniously sent Valin flying through the air and into the box, then leaped into it after him. Apparently she had already prepared it before coming to the bridge because there were oxygen containers and ration packs spread out over four powered shield generators. She flicked her wrist towards the air lock and it began to cycle, a blaring alarm warning that the cargo bay was about to be decompressed.
"Now *this* has to be a Solo-worthy idea," Valin groaned. "This is insane."
"Gets your blood pumping, doesn't it?" Alema levitated the lid over the container where an air-tight seal activated. The glow of the capital-ship grade shield generators illuminated the inside of the otherwise pitch black container. A violent jerk felt by the both of them was an indicator of their cargo container being vented into the cold of space at high speeds. "By the way, you'll have to use your energy-sponging thing to sap up the radiation these generators give off, unless you want us to be slow cooked instead of flash-fried."
"Now you tell me," Valin groaned.
"Ten, nine, eight," Alema counted down mischievously. "You always did want to go out with a bang, right?"
Valin stared at her with wide eyes. "This…is…insa…"
Then the drive cores detonated.
[.:(II):.]
Jysella emitted a muffled cry, a burning agony coursing through her body coinciding with the blinding nova of an explosion that was now engulfing a good portion of the Killik fleet. A sharp, aching absence in her chest filled her with dread.
"No," she whimpered, her hand resting on the viewport of the escape-pod she was in. "No, Valin!"
But it wasn't just Valin, she realized with terror. She couldn't feel her bond to Alema either. It was as if the Twi'lek and her brother had left a gaping, open wound where her heart used to be.
Jysella immediately realized what had happened. She had gone with the bridge crew to see to it that they got off the ship, with every intention of returning to make sure her brother left as well. Waking up in the escape with a giant knot on the back of her head, Jysella had suspected Alema's involvement. But now, with Alema's Force presence

disappearing entirely, she knew the truth. Alema must have stayed behind to try and convince Valin to leave. And the only reason Alema would have done something so selfless would have been out of some feeling of debt to her. A debt that had gone unfulfilled.
"Valin, Alema," Jysella whispered hoarsely, her hand on the cool material of the viewport. It just didn't seem possible. Her invincible, hero big brother, and her oh-so-flawed yet amazing big sister figure. Gone in a single flash of light.
Disbelief, confusion, grief, anger, flashes of each cycling at faster than light speeds.
The escape pod shuddered under the pull of a tractor-beam, stirring Jysella from her shock. Through the Force she immediately felt the presence of Killiks above her.
A rage she didn't think she possessed flashed through her. These stupid bugs just killed two of the most important people in her life. These stupid bugs who thought mass murder and force indoctrination would save the galaxy. Her rage and grief mingled, teardrops rolling down her cheek as she glared up at the approaching misshapen ship above her.
Her hand gripped the hilt of her lightsaber, her jaw clenching as she swiped at her tears.
If they wanted mass murder, she'd give it to them.
The pod was brought into a hangar, a modular design from a *Republic*-class Star Destroyer with metal doors that closed over the hangar entrance barring any way out.
But Jysella didn't want out.
From the viewport, Jysella could see both Joiners and Killiks awaiting her, a Joiner-pod prepped and ready to help her 'Join' the collective. All were armed, but she didn't care anymore. Her yellow blade stabbed out and sliced away the side of the escape pod with authority, the metal segment falling to the ground with a resounding clang. Jysella wasn't done, though. The escape pod had its own power source, and she had just exposed it. Before the Killiks and Joiners could react, she reached out and grabbed a sparking power cable. The energy coursed through her like the time on the Relephon moon. The thought only made her normally gentle face twist into a snarl as she thrust out her opposite hand.
Electricity arched out as if she had become a living arc-welder and those nearest to her were flash-fried in an instant. Even those behind them were affected as the electricity jumped from living being to being in a crackling chain of blue energy. Using the residual energy, she launched herself into a twisting flip. The Joiners and Killiks opened fire,

their lasers and projectile weapons filling the air in a coordinated grid. But Jysella's yellow blade batted aside the attempts, and she landed with a flourish of her saber that cut into the hangar floor.
She jammed her foot into the power-cables her extra slashes had exposed and let loose another barrage of searing electricity. She followed that up by using her absorbed energy to unleash a lethal wave of Force energy that mowed down a large swath of the remaining Killiks and Joiners in the hangar.
Those left tried to charge her, but she effortlessly danced around their attempts, cutting them down without mercy. They never showed the Hapans or Corellians mercy, so she had no reason to either. All the while, however, tears continued to escape her eyes. Memories of her brother and Alema fueled her rage, adding speed to her strikes and dance-like saber form.
Seconds passed, and soon the entire hangar was a darkened, near-frozen tomb, its power completely drained. A lone figure left it, walking purposefully through the mismatched hallways and heading towards the bridge. She continued to drag the blade of her lightsaber alongside the wall, creating a neat groove but also exposing more power relays and conduits. Anything that got in her path was instantly vaporized.
Jysella burst onto the bridge, the last of the Killik forces onboard were waiting. Fletche weapons, metal slugs, plasma, lasers, a hail of blaster fire greeted her. Jysella's yellow saber spun in a circle so fast before her it looked like a solid shield of gold. She continued to advance into the hailstorm of fire, absorbing the occasional laser strike and storing the energy as she did. She stopped between two devastated computer consoles, both hit by reflected laser bolts. Abandoning defense and plunging a hand into both, she let out an anguish-filled scream.
The Force rippled outwards, plastering the Killiks and Joiners against the walls and rending the internal organs of those closest to her. Several metal slugs ripped through her side and shoulder, but she didn't care in the slightest. With another yell, the last of the Killiks were blown backwards with bone-breaking force. And then all was silent apart from Jysella's ragged breathing, the bridge completely left in darkness.
Tears pouring from her eyes, she sagged to her knees and sobbed. Her lightsaber rolled from her hand, and as her wounds began to make themselves known, her consciousness left her.
[.:(III):.]
Jysella awoke slowly, feeling dull and empty. Remembering that Alema and Valin had just died caused her stomach to twist in knots and her heart to clench.

It just wasn't fair.
"Welcome back," a subdued Natua Wan whispered from her bed-side.
"Where are we?" Jysella murmured.
"Hapan medical frigate in a holding position outside the Relephon system," Natua answered. Her Selonian apprentice approached with a bowl of water and a small cloth. "Thank you Shrona."
"You're welcome, Master," the young Selonian's polecat head bobbed in acknowledgment. "Get well soon, Jedi Knight Horn." She bowed then exited the room.
"Valin's dead," Jysella said monotonously.
"I felt his passing as well," Natua murmured. "I…I am sorry we could not get to Relephon in time to make a difference. I…" Natua seemed to try several words, and then shook her head. "I'm the last person who should be trying to comfort you. Falleen don't do sympathy or pity too well."
Jysella just nodded, the empty feeling being replaced with numbness. "What am I going to tell mom and dad? Val and I were supposed to look after each other out here."
Natua remained silent, her head bowed in a silent show of the Falleen's grief. Jysella knew that Natua and her brother had shared a weird mental connection since the World Brain. It was why Natua had become a Corellian Jedi in the first place; though the Falleen had tried to pass it off as saying how can there be 'Green' Jedi if there were no 'green' Jedi in the Corellian order. In a way, Jysella supposed that Natua's stoic nature had rubbed off on Valin and probably saved his sanity after the war. Not that his hiding it had led to anything good.
"What happened after…well…after."
"Duch'da Gray was able to keep the Killiks from regrouping and forced them back inside Relephon. He didn't have the ships to continue the campaign, though so he pulled back. Hapan reinforcements arrived two days later. The rest of the Corellians from Hapes arrived a day after that."
"What? How long have I been out?"
"A week and a half," Natua said evenly. "Apprentice Zax was able to locate you on the destroyed Killik vessel, but you were very weak."
"What of the fleet?"
"Your brother's actions saved what was left of it. Despite the odds, two-thirds of the ships survived to fight another day. The soldiers are calling him a hero."
"I don't want a hero, I just want my brother," Jysella said hoarsely, tears once more filling her eyes.

Natua continued on, looking decidedly uncomfortable with the emotions Jysella was displaying. "Duch'da Gray is currently in charge of containing the Killiks within the Relephon system. Given how the system belongs to his House, the AlGray, he seems determined enough to succeed."
"The longer we wait, the more time the Kiliks have to rebuild their fleet." Jysella said softly. She pushed herself out of bed "I have to finish what my brother started. I have to wipe those blasted bugs from the face of the galaxy. How many Killik ships survived the blast?"
"The blast was not as effective as it could have been," Natua said reluctantly. "A majority of the larger Killik vessels were still outside the blast-radius when it detonated. Even then, it managed to take out twenty capital ships and their supporting vessels and leave a big enough hole in the Killik line for the Duch'da to take the initiative."
"What do you mean not as 'effective as it could have been'?" Jysella scowled as if Natua had personally insulted her brother. She put down the flight-jacket she was about to put on to glare at the older woman.
"Had the ship detonated a minute or two later, it might have been able to destroy twice or three times the number of ships," Natua answered. "The Killiks must have hit something vital or Valin must have felt the need to detonate the drive cores before that mark. There are still over a hundred and fifty Killik capital ships in the system."
Jysella swallowed heavily, her expression pained. "Stupid bugs."
"Indeed."
"I need to speak with this Duch'da," Jysella said grimly. "As well as any other flag-officers and whoever is left in command of the Corellian force."
"The former is easy. The latter easier still," Natua answered. She paused to talk to her apprentice over her comlink, relaying Jysella's request. She then turned her attention back to Jysella. "The remaining Corellian officers elected you and myself as their commanders. Their reasoning is that if Valin could hold off two-hundred ships with only two-dozen for a couple of weeks, then we should be able to accomplish similar impossible feats."
"Great, thanks big brother," Jysella snorted darkly. "Stupid idiot."
"Tiu Zax is currently overseeing fleet movements until my return. She will be relieved to know that you are….awake."
They exited the med-bay, Jysella's step deliberate and full of anger as she stormed to the ship's hangar bay. Natua followed several steps behind, joined by her own apprentice mid-way. Jysella couldn't detect an iota of emotion from the stoic Falleen, and for some reason that ticked her off even more. Natua had shared some weird bond with her

brother, but she didn't appear to mourn his death at all. But no sooner did those thoughts cross her mind, then Jysella closed her eyes in shame. She knew Natua was grieving, just in her own way. Natua had said it herself, Falleen don't do feelings well.
Jysella exhaled, trying to make sense of how dark the galaxy had just become.
After several more steps, she realized that the galaxy didn't make sense, and that's what unnerved her the most. Why in the world did Valin have to die fighting a war the Corellians had no right getting themselves involved in in the first place? Like the Hapans were fond of saying, what was happening was a Hapan affair. Valin died, and for what? To hold a piece of space so far away from their home, for another government that resented the Corellians for getting involved in the first place?
Trying in vain to shut her emotions down, Jysella slid into the cockpit of an inter-fleet transport shuttle and started it up. Natua silently took the co-pilot's seat, her apprentice climbing and sitting on the Falleen's lap.
The atmosphere was awkward for both Jedi Knights, but neither wanted to break the stillness as the shuttle coasted out of the med-ship.
The minutes ticked by, the shuttle now docking with the *Kendall*, the Hapan flagship. Awaiting them was Duch'da Aleson in all his Hapan nobility finery and ribbons and metals earned for various valiant actions.
"Jedi Knight Horn," Aleson tilted his head in a show of regret. "I am sorry for your loss."
"Feel sorry for me later," Jysella snapped. "What's the status on the bug fleet?"
"We are maintaining a perimeter around the fourth and fifth planets in the system. Relephon itself is still in control of the Killiks. It's been difficult considering we have a third of their number, but we're keeping our lines fluid."
"Can we expect further reinforcements?" They started a fast walk through the hangar and to the turbolifts.
"Two more Hapan fleet groups are on their way," Aleson answered. "The Queen Mother's consort, Jacen Solo, has successfully neutralized the Joiner Lomi and Killik activity has dropped across the Consortium. It's actually why we've been able to do as well as we have."
"Before your forces arrived, my brother had identified the Killik flag vessel," Jysella led.
"It hasn't been seen since the engagement. We're thinking that it is hiding in the gas clouds of Relephon."
"So you're sure it's still in the system?"

"Apart from a few smaller vessels running our blockade, none of the larger ships have been able to escape. We haven't been able to confirm it though because any incursion will compromise our ability to maintain our blockade. At least until we receive reinforcements."
Jysella bit back her first choice of words, realizing quickly that she'd sound like her brother if she called the situation unacceptable. The Hapans had their backs to the wall but were holding admirably despite the circumstances.
"*Duch'da*," the intercom chimed. "*Please report to the bridge. The Killiks are massing for another attack.*"
Glancing at one and other very briefly, the group started a light jog the remainder of the way. The doors to the bridge slid open and Aleson quickly brought up the sensor readings from various probes.
"This is different than before." Aleson frowned. "Look they're trying to attack five different regions at once."
"Can your ships hold?"
"Unknown," Aleson's foolish façade slipped a moment as his face became serious. "The ships of her Majesty's Royal Navy will fight with everything they have, but even split it is five to one odds in each location. And many of our ships have been damaged from previous sorties."
There was a brief chirp, and the holo-image of Tiu Zax appeared next to the computer monitor. "*Duch'da, are you reading me*?"
"We are Jedi Zax."
"*Analyzing their attack, I'd advise we let them through this time. Otherwise we won't survive any future breakout attempts.*"
"Nearly half of their remaining vessels are trying to get through. We can't allow them to escape into the Consortium."
"*Escape won't be on their mind, Duch'da. The Joiners absorbed by these hives are loyal to the Heritage Council, not the Queen Mother. We can guarantee they will pop up at a Royalist-held planet if we let them go."*
Aleson kept his face impassive as he nodded in understanding. "Can you take out as many ships as you can then? You don't have to hold them, just cripple them and reduce amount of damage they can do once they leave the system."
"*We can try."*
"Sir! Switch to probe five!"
Aleson turned his attention back to the viewing screen, switching to the appropriate telemetry. "The rest of the Killik fleet is emerging from Relephon!"
"They're trying to run the blockade with the first wave."

"It's a safe bet they or a Joiner infiltrator intercepted that last transmission," Natua said grimly. "Your command forces are from House AlGray after all."
"We have no choice but to engage now," Aleson gritted his teeth. He snapped a finger and gestured to the officers controlling the ship. "Helmsman, all ahead full. Bring the weapons and shields online. All hands to battle-stations."
"Do you have a fighter available?" Jysella asked.
"Yes, unfortunately more than a few," Aleson answered. "The skirmishes have taken their toll on our pilots."
"I'll be needing one then, I can do more damage from a fighter than this ship."
"It'll be ready when you reach the hangar."
"I will direct the fighting from the bridge," Natua said evenly. "Can the reinforcements get here any sooner?"
"No. The lull in the Killik's advances meant we weren't too concerned with when they got here."
Tiu Zax's hologram flickered back into existence. "*The aggressiveness of the Killiks has definitely increased, we won't be able to hold them.*"
"Five minutes, Tiu. The rest of the fleet is coming," Natua answered.
The Corellian and Hapan vessels that had been holding outside the system streamed forward. Most of the ships bore signs of battle damage, some missing entire sections but still battle-capable. Mismatched fighter squadrons streamed out of their carriers, likewise dinged and beat up in appearance. The gleaming chrome of the Miy'til fighters was scorched and covered in various pockmarks all over. Several X-wings were missing S-foils or laser cannons, their daring pilots willing to risk it to keep the bugs from menacing anyone else.
Jysella in the cockpit of an older-model Hapan X-wing activated her comm-switch. "Remember, the bugs fight with a hive-mind. They'll swarm to take out a single enemy. What we have to do is create the equivalent of a bug light, a bait so enticing they'll swarm it regardless of the danger."
"*Do you have any ideas?*" Natua asked.
"What's the biggest and baddest Hapan ship in the fleet right now?"
"*That would be the Kendall. It's the same class of Battle Dragon used as the Queen Mother's flag*."
"Great."
"*Jedi Knight Horn, I do hope you aren't planning to blow up <u>my</u> flagship too.*"
"You should love the idea Duch'da," Jysella snarked. "The brilliant Hapan military commander riding into impossible odds and taking

down ten times the number of enemy in a brilliant flash of light for the glory of his queen. We can't stop these bugs in a straight up fight, my brother realized that in the fighting before you guys got here. These are intergalactic space-bugs, but they're still bugs. They may be hundreds of thousands of beings, but they have only one mind, and one mind is all we need to trick."
"*How do you propose we make the Kendall an attractive target?*"
"Open fire all batteries at the most important Killik ships you can see. Doesn't matter if you're in range or not. Present yourself as the greatest threat, as something they have to take down. It's why the *Halcyon* bore the brunt of the fighting," Jysella tried to compartmentalize the thoughts of her brother as she gave the orders, but it was exceedingly difficult. She was never a fleet commander or strategist, that was her brother's realm. She was more of a people-person like her mother. "If that Killik flag appears definitely target that. In the meantime, evacuate whoever you can to other ships. No sense risking their lives too. The rest of the fleet need only wait for targets of opportunity."
"*Understood.*"
Jysella switched channels. "Jedi Apprentice Zax, do you read?"
"*Barely, our shields are out. Hull integrity failing. Help would be appreciated.*" Despite her report, there was not an ounce of panic in the teenage apprentice's voice.
"Coming in hot," Jysella saw Tiu's ship, a Corellian battle cruiser in flames and trying to fight off eight different ships at once. Its engines were still operational, and Jysella could see that Tiu was using her own ship to shield several missile-frigates and smaller vessels just as Valin had done earlier. "Reverse your course on my go, then have those missile boats unleash hell on those bugs."
"*Awaiting your go*."
The engines of her X-wings whined as she pushed more power into them, her fighter streaking through space at breakneck speeds. With her were what was left of four different squadrons, their mismatched fighter-types indicative of a cobbled-together squad. "Misfit Squadron, lock your first set of warheads on that shard-looking capital ship at the following coordinates; the conical one that looks like it was carved out of a giant asteroid. Then target the Nebulon-B Star-Destroyer hybrid next to it."
"*Roger Misfit Leader."*
"*Weapons ready*."

Jysella placed her own targeting reticule over the designated ship and quickly received a positive tone. "Apprentice Zax, reverse your course now!"
The battered Corellian battle cruiser limped backwards, though one of its engines erupted in flame from a suicide dive by a Killik picketship. The moment it was clear, though, the smaller Corellian vessels immediately released everything they had at pre-designated targets. At the same time, Jysella's fighter squadron and a few of the larger Hapan vessels that had followed them, likewise released their payloads. The Killik attackers were caught in a pincer-attack of two waves of warheads and never stood a chance. Detonation after detonation flared, overloading shields and engulfing the Killik vessels in blinding balls of white light.
Jysella allowed herself a vicious smirk as the explosions died and revealed a debris field of Killik ships. Dart-fighters, frigates, capital ships, everything was just an obliterated, burnt out wreck. "Great shooting, reform the line and get ready for the second group of bugs." In the meantime, she led her fighter squadron through the area to aid the next group of Corellian-Hapan ships under attack. She glanced down at her read-out. She had two more warheads left, one in each tube. Ahead was a group of fifteen Killik ships engaging a taskforce led by two Hapan Battle Dragons and another Corellian cruiser. A check of her sensor-read out, however, indicated that another thirty Killik ships were en route to their location as well.
"*Kendall*, recommend you start getting the attention of these bugs. We take them out, we take out nearly a third of their remaining ships."
"*Kendall reads you. All hands have already abandoned ship and automated processes are firing the turbolasers,*" the voice of Shrona came in reply. "*My master is currently busy directing the ship with the Force, please hold*."
"Show off," Jysella muttered, glaring at a Killik dartfighter as she cursed Natua's telekinetic abilities.
"*By the way, the Duch'da expresses great disbelief that we're about to blow up a perfectly good next-generation Battle Dragon,*" Shrona added lightly. "*Said that if the situation wasn't so bad, he'd be horrified at the mere mention of blowing up his ship. He also said Corellians are...*"
"*That's enough Shrona.*"
"*Yes, Master."*
"*Jedi Knight Horn,*" Natua took over. "*I've slaved the navi-computer to our shuttle's. The ship will be entering effective firing range in two minutes. Detonation will follow your go.*"

"Understood." Jysella grimaced as one of the Hapan Battle Dragons trying to hold the line crumpled under the withering fire. "Misfits, on my lead, fire at targets of opportunity but stay together."
The X-wings, Miy'tils, and B-wings that made up her squadron surged ahead, their lasers peppering the cloud of Killik fighters harassing the beleaguered taskforce. Small flashes of light went up all over the cloud as the unshielded dartfighters disintegrated under the barrage. And like a flag had been waved in front of a charging Reek, the swarm of dartfighter abruptly veered away from the taskforce and towards the incoming Hapan and Corellian fighters.
Laser and projectile fire pinged against her X-wing's hull and shields in a hailstorm of enemy fire. There were so many dartfighters that it was like traveling through a never-ending gauntlet of fightercraft that wanted to kill you. Jysella did the only thing she could do, she squeezed the trigger and let her quad-lasers do the talking. Dartfighters erupted all around her as her squad did the same. Even then, her shields began to fail.
"*There's too many of them!*" A panicked Corellian pilot screamed in terror.
"*I'm hit!*" A B-wing exploded under the onslaught, quickly followed by another X-wing and a Miy'til.
Just when it seemed like her squad would be swallowed by the swarm, they burst out the other side, looking a lot worse for wear than before —and considering most of them entered the fight in battle-damaged fighters, that was saying something. The other squadrons following them were about as fortunate as they were; losing a fighter or three but otherwise surviving the first pass.
Then the massive shadow of the *Kendall* loomed over them, its engine burning bright as it pushed everything it had into its shields and engines. The collection of Killik capital ships saw the threat through the eyes of their fighter pilots and abandoned the taskforce they had been demolishing to face the new arrival. Killik dartfighters began to slam into the *Kendall* in an effort to damage critical areas; in particular was the segment that held the top and lower half of the Battle Dragon together.
"Give the *Kendall* more cover," Jysella directed to the fighter squadrons. "It has to last until it reaches the bug capital ships."
"*That means going back into the fray, Lead. My fighter's only operating at sixty-percent.*"
"If you don't feel like you can do it then bug out," Jysella replied tersely. "All available fightercraft, our goal is to keep the bugs from destroying that ship before it destroys them. Follow my lead."

Directing her smoking fighter back into the battle, Jysella sent her quad-lasers blazing through another dartfighter, then fired one of her last missiles into a cluster of them, downing an entire squadron. More lasers and missiles joined hers, and the outnumbered Hapan and Corellian fighter-force began to reduce the suicide dives at drastic rates.

"*The bug capital ships are pulling back. I think they've understood what we're trying to do,*" Natua reported. "*The other ships are reporting similar withdraws. We've made our point.*"

Jysella watched the remaining dartfighters pull back towards their motherships, and said ships slink back towards Relephon. She then checked her sensors and brought up the image of the burning Battle Dragon and Corellian battle cruiser. "And they've made theirs too. We're down at least five more capital ships in exchange for the dozen and a half of theirs. Just want to say I'm not liking this number's game at all."

"*At least the Duch'da gets his ship back*," Natua offered. "*Imagine how insufferable he'd be if we destroyed it.*"

Jysella might have smiled at that once, but her eyes were still locked on the retreating Killik ships. She wouldn't rest until they were stopped. Wouldn't rest until they were incapable of hurting anyone else ever again.

[.:(IV):.]

The reinforcements from Hapes were a much needed reprieve. The gleaming Battle Dragons and *Nova*-class battlecruisers of two whole fleet groups greatly boosted morale. Colonel Gadell Vessau was the Queen Mother's personal representative of the fleet and promised that more ships were ready to depart if needed. It was now the Hapans that outnumbered the Killik forces, at least the Killiks the Corellians had seen.

"The Queen Mother wishes everyone here to know she greatly regrets the sacrifices and pain you've gone through in defense of her realm," Gadell said to the gathered captains and Jedi, hands clasped behind his back. "She also wishes to inform you that attempts to reach these Killiks through the Force and convince them to stand down have failed."

"It's the Joiners," Natua spoke up.

"As it was explained to me, yes," Gadell said succinctly. "Which makes our next task more complicated. Despite the lives you have already lost, the Queen Mother and her…consort, wish to preserve the lives of as many Joiners as possible."

"That's ridiculous!" Jysella blurted, a hand curling into a fist. "Those things are as good as bugs, especially after this long!"
"The Hapes political situation is…"
"Space that!" Jysella cut him off. "It's your politics that got us into this mess. Got my brother killed. Got tens of thousands of Corellian soldiers killed. And now you're telling us that the Queen Mother wants to try and *save* these things?"
"Correct," Gadell said patiently. "The alternative is genocide, and the Hapans do not condone that, never have. It is the belief of the Queen Mother and Jacen Solo that once the Joiners are disconnected from the hive, the Killiks will be more amiable to a surrender or retreat."
"And how many more will die doing that?" A Corellian captain, with a bacta patch slapped over a bad facial burn, spat. "We lost our admiral while you Hapans took your sweet time getting here to defend *your* territory."
"We've had enough," another Corellian glared. "We already fulfilled our part of the bargain and saved your asses. You have more than enough ships here now. Give us a good reason we shouldn't just pack up!"
"Jysella," Natua's even voice seemed to cut through the impending argument.
Jysella spun towards the Falleen, sensing the alarm in the older woman. "What?"
"You're projecting," Natua said evenly, tilting her head to the two Corellian captains on either side of her. The same two who had spoken out.
Jysella blinked, then realized that Natua was right and did her best to calm herself. The problem with being a powerful mind-manipulating Jedi was that sometimes the manipulation was completely unintentional. She had learned early on that if she became particularly passionate about something, people tended to agree with her view even if they had initially opposed it. Of course, in their current situation, that wasn't exactly the best for unit cohesion.
"You are indeed right," Gadell said. "The Corellians *have* shed enough blood for Hapes. If you desire to return to your homes then we will not keep you. Just know that the Queen Mother is in your debt."
"Jedi Horn?" The other Corellian captains looked to her.
"Permission to return to Corellia granted," Jysella said evenly, trying to separate her emotions from logic. Those who had come with her and her brother to Hapes had been expecting a quick and easy coup backed by a sizable portion of Hapes, not a dirty and bloody war against a seemingly innumerable enemy. Many of the Corellian pilots and soldiers had actually been straight out of the training academies

and were going to learn the ropes in the 'simple' operation. "Let them know what's happening out here. The dangers the Killiks present."
"Thank you, ma'am."
"I'll be staying on and will return when this conflict is over. I'm still a Jedi after all."
"I will too," Tiu Zax spoke up. And Jysella could feel the Omwati's desire to finish what Valin started mirror her own. "If that is okay, Jedi Knight Horn?"
"Of course," Jysella smiled tightly. "Natua?"
"I'll return with the fleet," Natua said calmly. "Shrona has felt more death than is healthy for someone so young and the atmosphere of her home den will be good for her."
"See you when we get back," Jysella said.
The Corellians and Natua bowed out of the briefing, and Tiu came to stand closer to Jysella.
"Sorry about the interruption," Jysella said faintly.
"We all have our limits," Gadell replied, accepting her comment with a nod. "As I was going to say, this conflict has already taken its toll on the Royal Navy. Before the Killiks emerged, the Royal Navy was composed of eight fleets, we are now down to five. Our own people are just as tired of this war, yet know that if they stop fighting their livelihoods will be destroyed. We don't have the option to retreat 'home' since our home is what the bugs threaten."
"How does Jedi Knight Solo plan to neutralize the Joiners?" Tiu asked. "Many of them are onboard Killik vessels."
"But most of the leaders of the Heritage Council remain on Sapphire," Gadell answered, using the Basic pronunciation. "Ducha Temperess AlGray, Duca Asin'vi Aros, Ducha Vianel Thane, and Duch'da Ri'ander Chell. With the exception of Ducha Zir-dan Chume Ta'Gheer and Ducha Siabali Galney, who were with the Joiner fleet that attacked Hapes, all others have been confirmed to be on that moon. They are the leaders of their movement, the Joiners involved belong to their houses and are following *their* desires. The Joiner's sentiment should be greatly lessened upon the removal of their influences from the meld. And with that the Killik aggression."
"An all out assault on Sapphire?" Jysella asked.
"Yes," Gadell replied. "While the Battle Dragons and *Nova*s deal with the Killik fleets, a strike-team will land and hunt down the Heritage Council leadership. Using the anti-Joiner darts our scientists have created, their goal will be to dart as many Joiners as possible."
"You are aware that Sapphire is completely infested," Jysella said. "My broth…well, I barely escaped when it turned out that the bugs made

their homes in the mining tunnels. Even if you engage the fleet, there are probably thousands of Killiks on the ground."
"The Queen Mother has given us permission to orbitally bombard all locations on Sapphire save for the inhabited regions of House AlGray."
"Isn't AlGray considered an ally of her throne though?" Tiu asked.
"Both Galney and Ta'Gheer implicated AlGray when questioned," Gadell replied. "In the simplest terms, their Houses are fair game. It is only the will of the Queen Mother and Jacen Solo that keeps us from bombarding their palaces as well."
"Tiu and I will lead that strike-force," Jysella volunteered. "We're both female so the Hapan commandos shouldn't mind taking orders from us."
"Indeed," Gadell allowed. "I'll pass on the layout of the Sapphire Palace to the both of you. We'll begin our attack tomorrow."
[.:(V):.]
The assault shuttle rocked back and forth as missiles exploded all around. The pings of projectiles bouncing off the armored plating wasn't exactly reassuring either.
"Geez, are they even trying to cover us?" Jysella grumbled, staring out the cockpit window as several squadrons of dartfighters raced by. A couple tried to ram the shuttle, but their Hapan pilot performed a dizzying spin which avoided the fighters and caused them to slam into each other.
Though the Killiks were now the ones outnumbered, they seemed to have deduced the Hapans' goal and were fighting for Sapphire with renewed ferocity. Their ships were working in concert to down the larger Hapan vessels while swarms of dartfighters eluded the Hapan fighters and went straight for the assault shuttles.
This, coupled with the Sapphire Palace's anti-air batteries made the approach especially perilous.
"Prepare for deployment, sir." The pilot spoke, their ship shaking again. "With this much heat, it'll be a touch and go."
"Got it," Jysella patted the pilot and co-pilot's shoulders. "Thanks for getting us here in one piece."
Jysella made her way to the back of the shuttle. The two-dozen Hapan commandos looked to her for an update."Rapid deployment. Prepare to move out."
The shuttle angled its way into the tram-station landing bay, the bay's defensive shields already shot out by Hapan fightercraft. Even before the shuttle touched down, however, a small army of Joiners inside the hangar opened fire with everything from slug-throwers to missiles.

Next to the shuttle, two more landing craft swung into position, dividing up the fire between the three of them.
"Go! Go! Go!" Jysella yelled the moment the ramp lowered. The commandos surged forward with Jysella in the lead, her lightsaber flaring as she prevented them from being bottlenecked.
Omwati apprentice Tiu Zax led the commandos out of another shuttle, while the Hapan commandos in the third followed a trio of energy-shield bearers. The commandos all raised their tranq-guns and began firing the anti-Joiner darts at their targets.
The shuttles began to take off again, but one of the three fell victim to a suicidal dartfighter that slammed into its cockpit at high speeds and blew both craft to pieces. The flying debris winged a second shuttle and caused it to crash-land in the rocky soil a little ways from the hangar bay.
The blast also knocked several of the commandos to the ground, but they had other things to worry about.
One of the Joiners fired a rocket at Tiu's group, and the Omwati apprentice sent it arcing away on a different trajectory where it exploded amidst a rack of ancient weaponry. Another rocket was sent towards Jysella. The Horn grimaced and held out her hand, building the Force around her in a barrier. The rocket detonated with a deafening roar, buffeting those it was aimed towards. Jysella did her best to absorb both the kinetic and fiery energy from the blast, releasing the build up into another Force Wave that sent a line of in-cover Joiners flying.
"Nice one, sir," one of the commandos commented, pulling Jysella behind cover while she recovered.
"Wish those things didn't come with shrapnel," Jysella grumbled, her armored jumpsuit dinged and pitted, with fresh cuts covering her hands and face. In the background the gunfight continued. The six squads of Hapan commandos fast dispatched their Killik-linked Joiner opponents, though not without taking a few casualties of their own.
Just when the last Joiner fell, the cargo-loading bay door began to winch itself upwards with a foreboding screech. The commandos quickly took up new positions, nearly six-dozen guns pointed in one location. The rolling door only got halfway up before a pair of tusks brutally slammed into it. The entire door mechanism, and the upper part of the wall, were blown into the hangar bay in a shower of debris. Several commandos were crushed under the unexpected weight while the rest were momentarily stunned as a tusked-beetle as nearly as tall as the spacious hangar, forced its way in.

The Hapans recovered and opened fire, though the small arms seemed to do little against its gleaming black plating. Its head thrashed from side to side, the largest tusks tearing a wider hole in the wall and catching a few unfortunate commandos in the process.
Jysella, searching for a non-suicidal answer, saw a pair of rocket launchers lying on the ground. "Tiu!"
The Omwati apprentice used the Force to tug one of the launchers to her while Jysella hefted the second. With the Force to synchronize their movements, they took aim and fired just as the beetle opened its mouth to roar in fury at the pesky commandos shooting at it. The rockets flew true, entering the open mouth and blowing apart the head of the massive creature. The body swayed, then collapsed where it stood; half-way into the hangar bay. With the body dropping, however, they could see a whole swarm of Killik warriors sprinting across the rocky lunar ground.
"Air support would be appreciated," Tiu said into her earpiece.
Another second later and Miy'til bombers roared by overhead dropping incendiary munitions on the approaching hoard. There was a feral shriek as hundreds of bugs were set alight at once, the carpet bombing not ceasing until the entire area was a glowing inferno of glassed ground.
"Into the trams," Jysella gestured.
There were four separate mag-rails and normally four separate cars. The middle two were still present, but the ones at the ends appeared to be at the palace-side station. Jysella, her team, and half of the team from the third shuttle got into one in a very crowded fit. Tiu, her team and the other half of the third shuttle's team piled in the other. With a push of a button, both trams began their high-speed route towards the gleaming blue palace.
And then the next line of Killer-Joiner defense kicked into gear.
"We've got bugs!" One of the Hapans yelled. She was pointing to the empty rail beside them. Ahead, it looked as if the entire rail was covered in Killik warriors as they scampered and crawled along its length. The situation was mirror on the opposite side, the rail covered in a large amount of Killik warriors.
The Hapan commandos began to open fire, but the Killiks leaped back and forth between the tram-rails. The Hapans couldn't fire when the Killiks leapt onto the rails supporting their tram-car for fear of blasting the path forward. The Killiks scuttled down the tram-rails, all wielding staff-like weapons that were capable of absorbing blasterfire.
A loud 'thud' atop of Jysella's tram car was evidence that a Killik had made it onboard. Before anyone could do anything, the spiky-end of its

staff weapon plunged through the plastisteel roof of the tram and impaled an unfortunate commando. The others quickly fired all around the staff-weapon, plasma bolts blasting holes in the roof. The Killik was thoroughly perforated, and its body fell off the side. But more Killiks began to reach the tram car.

And then both tram cars ground to a jerking halt. The sudden stop threw off some of the Killiks who had climbed onboard, but it now left the two Hapan teams suspended over a deep gorge with a half-kilometer still between them and the palace.

A half kilometer and a small army of Killiks.

Another staff weapon was thrust through the side of the tram-car, but this time Jysella parried it with her lightsaber, then yanked on it and threw the Killik atop the tram off the side. Slicing away the tram door, she performed a spinning twist that landed her atop the tram. The Killiks on top blinked at her in surprise, and that was the last thing they did. The Hapan commandos watched in mild surprise as bug-bits began to rain down from all sides of the tram.

"Come on!" Jysella yelled from above.

On the opposite rail, Tiu had followed Jysella's example, but had the added help of being able to use the Force. Sending constant streams of wind across the tram-rail, Tiu was literally blowing off the Killiks before they even reached her tram.

Jysella shot the Omwati apprentice an envious look in between parrying Killik staff swings and jabs. "Lucky!"

Tiu smiled faintly and flicked her wrist to hurl a Killik into its companions, the impact of which knocked the entire group off. The commandos finished clambering up onto the tram-rail and were now adding their laser fire to help out their Jedi shields. They advanced slowly, halving the distance and finally clearing the last of the Killik soldiers as they did.

Just then a laser fired by a Joiner sniper arched out and buried itself into the Omwati's shoulder, causing her to nearly fall off the tram. If it hadn't been for the commando behind her, she would have.

"Tiu!" Jysella yelled. A superheated slug flashed towards her, and Jysella barely blocked it in time. "This just keeps getting worse all the time!"

Then explosions ripped apart the segment of the tram-rail that connected itself to the palace station. The heavy metal bar began to sag under the strain, and amid more sniper fire, Jysella let out another Corellian curse. "Grappling lines, get to the other rails!"

Lines were fired off, but some were hit by laser fire, and more than a couple of Hapan commandos plummeted to their deaths. The middle

two tram-rails groaned loudly, then completely broke apart, sending several tons of metal crashing down.
As the Hapans and Jedi scrambled to recover, the ping of sniper bolts and lasers sounded all around them.
"We definitely have their attention," A Hapan commando grumbled, hanging off the side of the rail by her grappling line and shooting her rifle at the same time.
Again, the training of the Hapan commandos won out. Despite their precarious position, they managed to take out a majority of those shooting at them and finish crossing. Unfortunately, between the opening gun battle, the giant beetle, and their way over, they were down nearly a dozen commandos.
The group sprawled themselves on the floor of the tram-station, taking a moment to catch their breaths. As they did, Jysella and Tiu both dropped into very brief meditations to rejuvenate their own drained reserves. From the open tram-way door they had a brief glimpse of the sky and could see the space-battle raging with rarely seen ferocity. There was a distant explosion that shook the floor, the shield that was protecting the palace flickered for a moment, then died completely. Jysella's comlink activated shortly after.
"*This is Taskforce Besh. Thanks for taking the heat, shield generators are down and reinforcements are inbound. Our turn to be the bait now. Go say hi to the Heritage Council for us."*
"That went well," Jysella muttered, emerging from her meditation. "I can sense the Council holed up in that bunker-room we had our briefings in."
"No doubt the Joiners will defend it to their last."
"We still good on darts?" Jysella looked to the commandos, all of whom checked and nodded.
"Enough for about five-hundred more Joiners if we don't miss."
"If we run into five-hundred more Joiners, shoot me," Jysella echoed her brother. "You know the layout of this place, commandos, move out."
The team began a fast sprint through the hallways of the blue-hued palace. At every junction there appeared to be a Joiner fire-team waiting for them, yet the resistance itself was relatively light. A glance outside one of the towering windows revealed why. With the palace shields down, the Hapans had landed tanks and more squadrons of soldiers at the palace's doorstep, and a small army of Killiks and Joiners were engaging them.
The battle raged on outside and the team of commandos and two Jedi continued their descent into the depths of the palace.

Things were going well, which is why Jysella full expected things to go 'not well'. Her expectations were fulfilled the moment they stepped off the lift-platform. The lift had led to the lower levels of the palace where the vault holding the Heritage Council leaders was located. Lower levels that were well defended.

Joiners armed with flamethrowers and incendiary-grenade launchers unleashed a firestorm that kicked the temperature up from just below freezing to flash-broil in seconds. Jysella, who had sensed the danger shortly before the Joiners pulled the triggers on their weapons, had closed her eyes and was already manifesting the Force around them. The wall of heat washed over the Hapans and two Jedi, and for a split second they feared an imminent death. But then the flames flickered violently and, as if they were living, formed themselves into tendrils that spiraled around Jysella in an opaque pillar of fire. The air continued to distort around her, sucking in the flames and heat from a multitude of directions and leaving the Hapans and Tiu unscathed.

In the center of the firestorm, Jysella's eyes opened, flames dancing in her brown irises as she kept herself in sync with the Force and continued to absorb the fiery energy around her. She could feel her tunic being singed, smell her hair char, could feel parts of her skin burning as the heat licked at her, but she ignored the pain. Her sole focus was on containing and absorbing the lethal energies, turning that energy into a field of Force energy that kept her from baking herself alive. She could hear nothing outside the roaring fire swirling around her, could see nothing but the blue and orange maelstrom that danced with her movements. But that only helped her keep balance.

Who cares if she couldn't even lift a pebble with her mind, *this* is what her strength was. What no other Jedi besides her brother had been capable of; to stand in the middle of a firestorm and not fear death. After all, there was no death, only the Force.

Once the Hapans realized that they were still among the living, they immediately opened fire. The Joiners, who hadn't expected such a display, were easily mowed down.

Now seeing spots from the lack of oxygen in the middle of the fiery cyclone, Jysella thrust both her hands into the air, and the flaming column left her body and shot up the turbolift shaft.

"We should probably get out of the way," Jysella said faintly, swaying where she stood. Shortly after, the column of flame met the very top of the shaft in a distant explosion.

The Hapans and Jedi frantically dove to the landing they were on just as burnt metal debris came crashing down.

"Tiu," Jysella muttered, her lips chapped and her head spinning. "I think you should take over from here."
The Omwati apprentice caught Jysella before she fell and promptly injected the older woman with a combat stim. "Just like your brother. Insanely crazy."
"He stand in the middle of a column of fire too?" Jysella mumbled, accepting a drink from the canteen Tiu was putting to her lips.
"Worse," Tiu muttered back. "When a group of pirates we stopped a couple years back were going to shoot a bunch of civilians, Valin told them to empty their blaster packs into him first. Said he would attack them if they didn't, but stand and take it if they did. My master nearly got himself killed with all the energy he absorbed, but in the time it took for the pirates to reload and raise their guns again, the reinforcements arrived . Ended up with second and third degree burns to some of his internal organs and had to spend a week recuperating. Lucky for me he always said 'do as I say and not as I do.' Good advice, as getting shot over a dozen times seems painful."
"I never knew that," Jysella said, her eyes closed in pain. In the background, the commandos were now working on the vault door. "I didn't know even a fraction of the things he got up to playing pirate-hunter."
"We're in!" A commando yelled after the shaped charge they placed on the door left a gaping hole.
The commandos rushed in, the sound of their dart-guns firing filing the air for the next couple of seconds. In the meantime, Jysella looked around the landing, spying an escape shuttle that was fueled up and ready to go at the entrance to a tunnel. The Joiners probably didn't take it, she reasoned, because they would have been shot down the moment they emerged. Not that the Joiners did anything that matched her definition of sane and logical. Not that the Hapans did either for that matter. All Jysella had to do was turn her head and she could see the building's primary reactors pulsating down an adjacent corridor. *Who put main reactors next to hangar bays*? She though with delirious incredulity. All that anyone needed was a rough landing and boom, there went everything.
"Confirmed capture of the remaining Heritage Council members. But sirs, you should come here and take a look at this!"
Despite being dehydrated and weak from shielding the others from the firestorm, Jysella let Tiu help her to her feet and they gingerly stepped through the giant hole in the vault door. The Joiners were all sprawled where they fell, darts in their necks a testament to the skill of the commandos. But what caught Tiu and Jysella's attention was the big-

as-a-starfighter-big, oblong, and very bomb-like device seated atop the main conference table.
A bomb-like device with blinking lights and a counter that was counting down.
"Captain?" Jysella looked to the commando for an explanation
"It's a bomb, sir," the captain said while two of the commandos worked to defuse it. "Hapan design. It was banned several hundred years ago because of its radioactive nature. When detonated it releases a powerful wave of neutrons and radioactive fire. "
"Can you disarm it?" Jysella said anxiously. Keenly aware that the primary reactors to the palace were only a couple dozen meters away from the vault.
The captain looked to her people, who promptly pulled themselves from their tasks and shook their heads. "No good, the Killiks altered the design somehow. We could probably defuse it but not in the amount of time we have left."
"And how much time is that?"
"Less than five minutes."
"Okay, get the Heritage Council onto that escape shuttle," Jysella gestured. "As nice as it would be to leave them here, we actually came here and darted them to keep them alive, so let's not drop the ball now."
Tiu went to the communication's console. "This is Jedi Apprentice Tiu Zax, all Hapan forces withdraw from this mesa. A neutron bomb is set to go off by the palace's main reactors, you have less than four minutes to get to a safe distance!"
For a shuttle meant to hold only a dozen and a half, a little over two dozen commandos, a dozen unconscious Hapan Joiners, and two Jedi crammed themselves in. The start-up cycle was skipped in favor of a very hasty exit, and the shuttle shot down the darkened tunnel in front of it as the time continued to count down.
Of course tunnels meant bugs, and bugs meant Killiks. More than one Killik dropped out of the rock-cut passageway and somehow managed to time its drop to land directly onto the fleeing shuttle. The sounds of their staffs pounding on the hull echoed through the heavily-laden ship.
"We're not going to make it," Jysella grimaced, her knuckles white around the throttle. The addition of more Killiks had caused several warning lights on the dashboard to light up. The already overloaded shuttle was now reaching critical capacity, and given that they were still in the tunnel, the shuttle had no room to maneuver. The pounding on the outside continued and the pounding of Jysella's heart

threatened to leave her chest as she involuntarily took in a deep breath.
"Detonation detected," Tiu said with maddening calm. "Deflector shields full aft."
In addition to the Killiks, the rocks of the tunnel began to fall, clanging loudly off the fleeing shuttle. A warning sound began to beep, and the shuttle sent up sparks as it scraped the bottom of the passageway. The occupants of the shuttle were bounced around, but fortunately or not, their fish-in-a-can status meant that they didn't get tossed from one side of the shuttle to the other.
"There's the exit," Tiu gestured.
"Yeah, I'm going as fast as this thing can!" Jysella grumbled. "I can't believe it. Once again I'm running for my life in something that can't even go to hyperspace. The Force must hate me or something."
"If the Force hated you we probably wouldn't survive this," Tiu pointed out.
A gout of flame traversed the tunnel, limited only by the amount of rock that continued to fall as the entire mesa collapsed.
"Go, go, go, go, go!" Jysella urged the shuttle, the flames now licking at the sides of the cockpit window and threatening to swallow the ship. It was bouncing wildly now, scraping against the bottom, side, and roof of the escape tunnel with reckless abandon.
Just when it seemed as if the flames would engulf them, the shuttle shot free of the tunnel with a roar.
And then the engines sputtered out, its upward moment stalled, and it began a slow downward arc.
"The Force hates me," Jysella moaned.
"Look on the bright side," Tiu spoke, though she too grimaced as she prepared for impact. "At least we accomplished our mission objectives.
From their vantage point they could see that the Sapphire Palace was disintegrating as the mesa beneath it collapsed.
"Yup, the complete an utter destruction of a building the Queen Mother wanted to preserve," Jysella said sarcastically.
"At least the space-battle appears to have stopped," Tiu continued to try to find the bright side of their current situation.
The shuttle began to pick up speed as gravity pulled it back to the moon.
"There's that," Jysella shrugged. "Guess this means Corellia will be done with Hapes now."
"Guess so," Tiu sounded dubious.

"Maybe I should just stay away from any vehicle that moves," Jysella sighed, closing her eyes and preparing to absorb some of the kinetic energy of the crash. "They never have long life expectancies."
"And I'll just stay away from you if you're ever in a moving vehicle," Tiu agreed. She then looked over her shoulder towards the cramped passenger cabin. "Brace for impact."
"You could have sounded more urgent," Jysella muttered, the Force weaving itself around her.
"Not like it'll affect how we impact with the moon," Tiu shrugged.
"Hey, Apprentice Zax."
"Yes?"
"Thanks for staying."
"Had to finish what my master started."
"Even if he wanted no part of this?
Tiu closed her own eyes. "Especially because of that. My master was a great Jedi."
Jysella exhaled slowly. "Yeah, he was."
The shuttle slammed back into the moon's surface, throwing up a spray of gravel everywhere. It spun and flipped several times, its charred and scratched wingtips breaking off. Finally it slid to a skidding stop, and like current shape of the Corellian force that had arrived in Hapes a few months earlier, the remains of the shuttle was barely recognizable.
The cracked and shattered viewports were sent flying by a blast of Force energy, and very slowly the survivors extracted themselves from the mangled wreck.
Taking another breath of the thin atmosphere of Sapphire, Jysella turned her gaze to the glowing blue ball of Relephon.
She closed her eyes and breathed softly. "It's over Val. We can finally go back home."
[.:(Chapter End):.]

Jaina
[.:(I):.]
"You couldn't have known."
"I should have expected it," Jaina sighed, pushing her food around in her plate and staring out of the viewport at the blue glow of hyperspace. "I mean, the Vong thought that they were swell allies. They wouldn't have thought that if the Vagaari were nice people. I just thought…I don't know, Elansh and Ariarsh would be more than that."
"There's nothing we can do about it now."

"I know," Jaina breathed out shakily, shaking her head. "I know, Jagged. But still. Taat surrendered, they were leaving. They were no longer a threat."
"Taat did massacre a race already very low in population numbers," Jagged reminded. "They did irreversibly enslave the homeworld and ravage the system. I don't believe the Galactic Alliance would have done any differently if given the chance."
"I'm a Jedi, Jagged," Jaina said the word 'Jedi' sourly. "Though a part of me agrees with you, I was raised to see every sentient life as part of the Force. The Vagaari just blasted a large part of that Force into atoms."
As she spoke, Jaina thought back to the events that occurred shortly after she had convinced Maez to stand down.
"The Killiks are leaving the planet, Vagar Praxut is yours again, Supreme Commander, Overseer," Jaina smiled at the young Vagaari leaders. Through the bridge window of the Vagaari battle cruiser they were on they could see a small fleet of Killik-controlled transports and cargo vessels emerge up out of the planet.
Elansh and Ariarsh bowed their heads. "We are grateful for your help. Should you ever need the Vaga'ari you have but to call on us."
"Then might I ask for the assistance of the Vagaari in defending Csilla and the rest of the galaxy against the Killik fleet?"
"[You may,]" Ariarsh acknowledged. He turned to the captain of the ship and rattled off a string of orders as if he had been doing so his entire life. "[Listen up, I am Supreme Commander Ariarsh son of Duresh. Rally the fleet, we still have a foe of unquestionable strength to match our prowess against. I want a readiness report within the hour. Send what ground forces we brought to secure the planet. I have yet to be defeated in combat and I will not mar that record.]
Jaina smirked and leaned her head towards Jagged. "Nice touch with the wording of those commands. 'Never been defeated?'"
"It is the truth. He has commanded all of one combat engagement, the mission to retake the planet. I believe that came out satisfactory, don't you?"
"You've been hanging out with too many Chiss."
Then Jaina felt a shift in the Force, a warning. Frowning she glanced out the large, round viewport. The large fleet of Killik transports was continuing the stream from the planet without any problem. Like an honor guard, the Vagaari fleet was arrayed on two sides of the departing vessels. Though the Vagaari fleet was smaller in number, the Killik vessels had minimal offensive and defensive abilities. Her brown

eyes continued to scan the region outside of the ship. She couldn't shake the very bad feeling that suddenly had her stomach turning.
"Jaina?" Jagged said in a low voice.
Jaina brought her gaze to her immediate surroundings. They were on the bridge of the Vagaari command cruiser, surrounded by surly looking Vagaari warriors. Everyone appeared to be calm, nonchalant even as they set about preparing for the next leg of their journey.
It was then that Jaina's eyes focused on both Elansh and Ariarsh. Both were looking at her guiltily, their gaze shifting the moment their eyes met hers.
"Guys?" Jaina said softly.
"We apologize, Jedi Solo," Elansh said her voice soft. "But if we are to help the Chiss as Vaga'ari. We must prove we are Vaga'ari first. Otherwise the fleet will never follow us."
"What..." Jaina detected the thoughts going through the young teens' minds. Brown eyes grew wide with shock, her gaze quickly shifting to the convoy of Killiks ships outside. "Wait, you can't..."
"[Commander, is the fleet in position?]" Ariarsh asked.
"[They are, Supreme Commander.]"
"Ariarsh, wait, you don't have to do this. They are unarmed, they're not a threat any longer"
"[Yes, Jaina Solo]," Ariarsh said firmly. "[We do. The Killiks failed to beat us, but caused us great suffering. To let them live free and clear is a mistake some will take for Vaga'ari weakness. They will always be a threat so long as the knowledge of how to defeat the Vaga'ari remains in their memory. We must do this. We are Vaga'ari after all. This is our way. Open fire.]"
Jaina was completely helpless as the Vagaari fleet unleashed a fiery barrage on the retreating Killik vessels. The barely-armed transports didn't stand a chance. One by one the super-transports, shuttles, and cargo vessels were shredded by Vagaari laser fire. Missiles fired from Vagaari fighters ripped into the flimsy hulls of the Killik ships, turning them into blazing balls of fire. Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of lives were snuffed out in the time it took for Jaina to take in her next breath. Millions of Killiks onboard non-standard capital-ship designs perished. Millions of Vagaari Joiners were likewise annihilated before her very eyes.
The sudden, intense onslaught, echoes of pain, and following silence in the Force caused Jaina's knees to buckle. Had she been ready for it, she might have taken it impassively. But she had been riding on the high of liberating Vagar Praxut sans genocide; and the higher one was, the further they had to fall.

A ship full of thousands of Joiners was ripped apart, the lives onboard sucked out into the vacuum of space. Jaina let out a gasp, falling to her knees and clutching at her chest as those thousands of lives going out hit her all at once. The fact that the Joiners shared a hive-mind meant that the pain of each death was amplified thousands of times over, each Joiner experiencing the death of the others before they too ceased to function.

The Vagaari vessels continued to fire. The Killiks and Joiners continued to die. The ship that contained Maez vanished in a flash of bright white light as a missile ignited its drive core, the Force amplifying his death even further. Several Ssi-ruuvi transports that no doubt held Ssi-ruu Joiners fared no better. It was a sudden and brutal massacre

Where there had once been millions of lives pulsating in the Force, there was soon an empty void. Silence where millions of voices once conversed. A wound in the very fabric of the Force.

Jaina was aware of Jagged's hand on her back, could feel his concern for her, but it barely registered. Her ashen, sweat-slicken face tilted back up to the young Vagaari in charge of their new empire. "It didn't have to be this way."

"*You have the Vaga'ari fleet at your command, Jedi Solo," Elansh said remorsefully, turning her back to Jaina. "Please tell us where you would like to go. Vaga'ari pay off their debts after all."*

On unsteady legs, Jaina pulled herself up to her feet again. She could feel the taste of her previous meal in the back of her mouth, and tried to take several calming breaths. "Set course for Csilla. We started Killik genocide, we might as well finish it. And get me a shuttle, I think I'll return to the Placeholder for the time-being. You obviously have things under control here."

"Jedi Ambassador Solo," the voice of Feesa brought Jaina out of her memories.

"Major?"

"We'll be arriving at Csilla in ten minutes. Latest intel reports say that the Empire is making a push for the planet. We got here just in time."

"Wonderful," Jaina sighed. She tried to smile reassuringly at Jagged, but he clearly knew her better than she thought he did. She gave him a brief kiss on his cheek for being so concerned for her, and stood. As she did, Jaina Solo disappeared and she was once again the Sword of the Jedi. "Make sure all our comm-systems are functioning. The Chiss are going to have all their ships guarding the planet if the Imperials are going to throw everything *they* have at it. Perfect time to get everyone to grow up and get along."

"Ma'am," Feesa remained in the doorway.

"Yes?"
"It is doubtful the Ascendancy will agree to any ceasefire that does not involve the Imperials paying reparations. And the Imperials will not yield until the Ascendancy admits defeat, which it won't."
Jaina just glared at the Chiss officer. "Then the Ascendancy will find out that the Vagaari still *really* don't like your people and might just ally with the Imps to finish them off."
"A threat?"
"No," Jaina snorted. Space Jedi sensibilities. She knew her uncle wouldn't approve, but now was not the time to be delicate. "But I'm sure the royal Vagaari kids will be open to the idea. As much as we can use the CEDF firepower. They're useless if they don't get on the same page as us."
"Assistant Syndic Hess'irolia'nuruodo will stand down," Jagged spoke, placing a hand on Jaina's shoulders. "And the CEDF is loyal to her and myself. Even if the Ascendancy leadership plays difficult, they won't have the teeth to back up their threats."
"Good, because I did not just go through the last couple of months running and blowing things up to return to idiots who can't see reason," Jaina said coldly. "Let's go to the bridge. I want to see how bad things have gotten in person.
[.:(II):.]
The message to the Imperial and Chiss fleets had gone about as well as Feesa had predicted. Despite Turi's best attempts to convince them otherwise, the Imperials suspected a trap. Despite Jagged Fel's best attempts to convince the local CEDF garrison to stand down, for some reason the sight of a Vagaari battle fleet dropping out of hyperspace in orbit above their home planet had the Chiss somewhat skittish. It's not like the threat of a thousand intergalactic space-bug controlled ships was believable in any case. More believable was the thought that the reputation of the Ascendancy and Empire was hanging on the outcome of the war and neither side wanted to lose face.
Nor did they really want to fight the battle for Csilla either.
After the obligatory threats, blustering, and posturing, the remaining leaders of the Ascendancy and the leaders of the Imperial Fleet agreed to a Jedi-mediated meeting. Of course, that was after the stipulations and conditions that both sides tried to impose on the other before they came to the table.
Jaina and Turi were having none of it, and promptly told the respective sides, in the most polite terms their limited patience allowed, that the talks were unconditional and mandatory for anyone with a higher-functioning brain.

Which was how the Vagaari super-cruiser *Conqueror of the Stars* became neutral territory for the meeting.
"If someone other than yourself told me that a Vagaari cruiser would be a safe and neutral area to hold a peace-conference, I would think them delusional," a highly incredulous Irolia said, snapping off a sharp salute at Jagged.
"Assistant Syndic," Jagged returned the salute professionally.
"The title is yours again, sir," Irolia replied crisply. "The CEDF stands by you and the Nuruodo family."
Jagged blinked. "I don't want the title. I'm not even Chiss."
Irolia took off the rank insignia from her uniform and placed it onto Jagged's dress-whites. "That's one of the reasons why, sir. Do you seriously think the Imperials will take me seriously? You're a human, and a Fel, and probably the only human in this system besides Ambassador Solo who doesn't want the Chiss dead. I know you will do right by the Ascendancy."
Jagged cast a beseeching look at Jaina, who studiously looked away and otherwise decided to be unhelpful in that moment.
"Fine, I accept," Jagged grumbled. "My first order is for you and our strategists to talk with the Vagaari fleet commanders about the threat we will soon face. Learn about the tactics, the schematics, and anything else that might help us even the odds."
"Sir?"
"Irolia?"
"You…want us to look to the Vagaari for advice?"
"I thought I was relatively clear about that."
"Oh, okay," Irolia blinked slowly. "I'll…go and stock up on tranquilizers first."
"Irolia."
"They'll be for our people sir, not the Vagaari."
"Very well, do what you need to do. But we have very little time and much to do."
"Understood."
"Dismissed, Admiral Nuruodo."
"Sir?"
"You made me in charge of the CEDF. It's my prerogative to appoint my command staff. You're an admiral now."
Irolia looked at him mutinously, but saluted nonetheless. "I'll carry out your orders, Assistant Syndic. Please make sure that the rest of my people and those the Empire has prisoner are treated fairly."
"I will do my best."

When Irolia departed back to her shuttle, Jaina smirked. "That actually works out for the better, Assistant Syndic."
"I do not appreciate having the fate of an entire race in my hands," Jagged muttered.
"It worked out for the Vagaari."
"I will rephrase that. I do not appreciate having the fate of an entire race in my hands more than once a year."
Jaina rolled her eyes and patted his arm sympathetically. "Get used to it buddy. You're with me. Us Solos never do anything small. Save a single person or group of people, meh. Save a city, if we're really bored and we have to. Save an entire planet and its people, now you're getting warm. Save the galaxy and we're talking business."
"I thought Jedi were supposed to be modest," Jagged deadpanned.
"I am modest, when I have to be. Oh, look, the remaining Aristocras are coming."
Turning towards Jaina's gesture, Jagged could see the unarmed escort of Chiss marines escorting the remaining two Aristocras—Chaf'orm'bintrano and Csapla'nodi'antealo—out of the Chiss transport and into the hangar bay. Accompanying this group were two older Chiss, both very strong in the Force.
"Great, the Chiss have their own Jedi too," Jaina sighed. "Probably from grandpa's generation given how old they are. This should be fun."
The Chiss delegation slowed to a stop in front of Jagged and Jaina.
"Assistant Syndic," Formbi said with a small nod.
"Aristrocra," Jagged returned.
"Brought your own Jedi?" Jaina gestured to the person she recognized as Veeren's bodyguard, Kung'urama'nuruodo, and the female Jedi flanking the Chiss delegation.
"To ensure that there is no underhanded dealings in these negotiations," Aplano, the Csapla Aristocra scowled.
"A pleasure to meet you," Jaina bowed politely to the two older Jedi. She noted the scarred and grizzled male of the duo. "Good to see you again, Kung'urama. Surprised to see you at the side of another family's Aristocra."
The male Chiss Jedi inclined his head slightly. "I serve the Ascendancy, not the Nuruodo family."
"Of course," Jaina said with a knowing lift of her eyebrows.
Female Chiss Jedi, Antaria Wellos, changed topics expertly. "Thank you bringing both sides to the table. There has been enough senseless loss of life already."
"It's one of those 'if we don't cooperate we're all dead' situations. Didn't really have a choice," Jaina said with a forced smile. "The

meeting room is just down the hall to the right. The Imperials will be joining us shortly."
The Chiss delegation inclined their heads and somewhat nervously let the Vagaari officers escort them further into the ship.
"And the Imperial delegation is a punctual as ever," Jagged gestured to the Lambda-class shuttle that coasted into the hangar bay and parked right next to the Chiss' Lambda-class shuttle.
"And they have *their* Jedi too," Jaina groaned, sensing the Force probes coming from the ship. "What did the galaxy do while we were away? Start a billion Jedi academies?"
The ramp to the Imperial shuttle lowered, and black-armored stormtroopers accompanied Moff Lecersen, Admiral Pryl, Turi, and two teenage Force-users out of the ship. Like the Chiss, all were unarmed. Jaina raised an eyebrow at Turi's decidedly un-Jedi choice of clothing. "New wardrobe, Altamik?"
On approach, the younger woman smirked and gave a mock-vain glance at her Imperial black outfit. "Better contrasts with my hair. Jaina Solo."
Jaina rolled her eyes. "Who are the kids?"
"Flight Officers Antalia and Sivan Draco of Skull Squadron," Turi introduced. "Imperial Jedi."
"I bet Denon just loved that."
"They'll get over it. You recognize Moff Drikl Lecersen. With him is Fleet Admiral Pryl."
"Moff, Admiral," Jaina said cordially.
"Ambassador Solo," Lecersen said blandly. "Can we get this farce over with? The Empire…"
"Will get the business end of my lightsaber if they keep doing things that require me to stab them," Jaina cut him off, causing the gray-haired Moff to scowl. "We're here to end the war between the *Remnant* and the Ascendancy in a stalemate so that we can get on with our lives and survive the coming onslaught. Jedi Altamik sent me the numbers. A third of your invasion fleet is out of action. Another third is battle-damaged and in need of repair. Sure you decimated the CEDF, but you have what, a few dozen capital ships in fighting condition left? Between the Imperial forces out here and the Chiss, you can probably scramble *maybe* seventy capital ships in pristine condition. Toss in the Vagaari and we have another four-dozen more. That's a little over a hundred capital ships against the thousands the Killiks are throwing at us. I don't know about you, but increasing those odds seems a bit stupid, Moff Lecersen. We've only just met, and you don't seem like a stupid guy. Please don't prove me wrong."

Lecersen's jaw moved several times, his face reddening with anger. However, he could see Jaina's point and glowered at her in silence. With a jerk of his head, he and the rest of the Imperial delegation began to walk out of the hangar and towards the meeting room.
"What happened to your diplomatic tact?" Turi snorted, passing Jaina.
"Spaced it when the galaxy didn't like it," Jaina replied. "Mind making sure your Remnant buddies don't foul up the discussion?
"See you in a bit," Turi gave a two-fingered salute and hurried to catch up with the grumpy Moff.
Jaina stretched her arms briefly then cast a wry look at her boyfriend. "Well, now here comes the *very* fun part. Convincing everyone we hold all the cards so they don't kill each other."
"We could just let them kill each other and save ourselves the headache," Jagged pointed out, walking in stride with her.
"Tempting," Jaina muttered. "Even if we pull of a Solo-style miracle and get these nerfherders to work together, we'll still need the rest of the galaxy's help. Otherwise we can all die a brave and daring death befitting of the legends we are."
"Tempting," Jagged said dryly. "Always wanted to be a legend. Father set the bar rather high. The only reason why the everyday Chiss even recognize me is because I'm the sole human commanding officer in the Ascendancy."
"Given Altamik's devious mind, you'll probably be more than that when the meeting is over."
"Your senses telling you something?"
"Possibly. This meeting is only going to go well if either the Empire or the Chiss cede control of the region. The Remnant won't want that black smear added to their records of could-have-beens. The Chiss Ascendancy is too proud to admit when they are wrong. It'll be up to us Jedi to convince everyone to go along with something no one will be happy about. Considering you're human, from and Imperial background, and respected by the Chiss, there really are very few alternatives that don't end in bloodshed."
"I agreed to be an Assistant Syndic, not an Aristocra."
"Well see," Jaina said, patting his arm placatingly.
The door to the conference room hissed open, and Jaina took in the delegates on the three other sides of the square table. There were the Vagaari, with Elansh, her father Intarsesh, and the Supreme Commander in training Ariarsh. There were the Chiss, with both Aristocras and the Chiss Jedi. And there was the Imperial Moff, admiral and Imperial Jedi. Each group had a phalanx of soldiers behind their delegation, all trying to look their most intimidating and death-inducing

without even twitching a muscle. The diplomats all tried to mimic their escorts, looking dourly at the others.
The Chiss were glaring at the Imperials for invading, at the Vagaari for existing, and probably at themselves for getting in the situation they were in in the first place. The Imperials were pretending that the non-humans, Chiss and Vagaari, in the room were little kids who were getting the benefit of the doubt. At the same time the Imperials knew they were in hot water if they decided to attack first. Combined the Vagaari and Chiss fleet outnumbered their own. Of course, that was if the Vagaari sided with the Chiss. The Vagaari were giving barely veiled looks of annoyance and doubt at the Chiss, and distrustful glances to the Imperials. Even they were doubting whether or not it had been the right idea to come so far away from their homeworld.
Taking this all in, Jaina forced a smile.
"Great, thank you all for coming." She pulled out a small device and the holo-emitter in the center of the table activated. A map of the Chiss territories and surrounding regions appeared. "In front of you all is a datapad filled with my team's findings from Vagar Praxut. As you can see, the Killiks were the ones responsible for starting tensions between the Chiss and Imperial Remnant."
"Empire," Lecersen corrected absently, glancing through the data.
"In hopes that the two of you would wipe each other out and leave your territories vulnerable to their own invasion," Jaina continued without looking at the Moff. "The numbers revealed to me before the Vagaari Empire blew apart the more cooperative Killiks hinted at a fleet of over a thousand ships."
"Figures, savages," Aristocra Csapla'nodi'antealo muttered.
"Aristocra, shut up. The Vagaari are the reason why the Imperials are at this table and not slapping stun-cuffs on you," Jaina said bitingly.
"Now what I propose in this meeting is that both the Chiss and *Empire* agree to end all hostilities from this point on and prepare for the Killiks. I wasn't certain, but the Killik fleet should be here just before the next election for the GA Chief of State. That means we have five or so months, maybe less. We need to use that time to fix up and rebuild everything the little war between your peoples wrecked. Not continue the little war and leave things in ruin for the Killiks."
"The Ascendancy would demand reparations," Aristocra Formbi voiced. "The Imperial Remnant is the aggressor in this war and have devastated many of our systems. If they wish for us to work alongside them, they must first fix up the damage they created."
"We'll fix up the systems that remain in our control," Moff Lecersen answered back. "They are now sovereign Imperial territories, its people

agreeing to our administration. Remember, it was the Chiss who first annexed our systems several years back and were responsible for the ill-will between our peoples."
"Enough!" Jaina pounded a fist on the table. "If the Killiks get here, it won't matter who controls what or who owes what. Didn't you people learn that lesson when the Vong wiped the floor with your fleets? Yes, leaders on both sides wronged the others, but between the Empire and the Ascendancy you have a population of several billions of beings. Are you going to let these tit-for-tat squabbles punish the everyday people who probably wanted nothing to do with the war in the first place? Are you going to sacrifice those lives to the Killiks while we decide who owes what to who?"
"But…"
"The Empire…"
"Enough," Jaina repeated. "Look, I'm no diplomat. I'm a soldier, a pilot, a Jedi. You're leaders of your people, but you're also soldiers who know what happens when politics gets in the way of a sound tactical plan. Aristocras Formbi and Aplano, the Ascendancy is currently in shambles. Your colleagues and their homeworlds are either ash or under Imperial control. The sensible thing is to step down before more Chiss die."
"We will not put the Ascendancy under the jackboot of the Remnant," Aplano scowled. "We did not fight them this far only to surrender now."
Jaina stared at the Chiss delegation for a very long moment. As fiery brown eyes raked them over the coals, they stared back with resolute defiance. When Kung'urama met her stare with a knowing nod, Jaina swallowed. The option open to her now wasn't exactly a Jedi one, Jaina reflected. But it was as the older Chiss Jedi had said. Sometimes, to do the right thing, old ways had to be tossed out.
"Supreme Commander Ariarsh," Jaina looked to the Vagaari teen. "If given a choice, what would the Vagaari rather do. Support the Chiss in the war against the Empire, or assist the Empire in ending the Ascendancy once and for all?"
The startled cries and gasps that went around the table, were silenced by Jaina's hand motion.
Ariarsh straightened his shoulders and stood. With Jaina translating, he answered her question in an even voice. "[You were the one who developed the plan to free Vagar Praxut, Jaina Solo. Our debt is to you and Jagged Fel, *not* the Ascendancy. I know for a fact that the warriors with us will much prefer to end our millennia-old hated enemy once and for all. If you tell us to ally with the Imperials to raze Csilla, they will be more than happy to do so.]"

Jaina once again looked to the Chiss, using the Force to enhance the fears and doubts in their minds. She didn't have time for them to play their political games, and the little push would help them reach the conclusion they would have otherwise come to anyways.
Both Formbi and Aplano were quickly re-evaluating their options, at the same time seeing the consequences of their choices. After a moment, however, they appeared to slump in resignation.
"What would you have us do, Ambassador Solo?" Formbi said in a low voice.
"Dissolve the Ascendancy and make Chiss space a part of the Imperial Remnant," Jaina answered, looking to Turi.
The blond-haired Imperial Jedi stood. "Agree to that and we will allow Jagged Fel to be the Moff of the sector."
"We will?" Lecersen looked sharply to Turi.
Turi matched Jaina's dour expression. "Well, Evelyn's sure as Sith not going to get the job after losing most of her fleet. Grand Moff Quille certainly isn't going to give it to you. And the last thing we want is one of those pure-Imperialists Quille has hanging onto him becoming Moff and creating a Chiss insurrection. Fel's known among the Chiss, commands the respect of their military. And he'll need that to keep everyone here in line."
"And who will keep *him* in line," Admiral Pryl spoke up.
"The Imperial Jedi, of course," Turi said with a predatory grin, gesturing to Antalia and Sivan behind her. "They've sworn loyalty to the Empire, and the former Inquisitorious have already vouched for them. We'll make sure he upholds the ideals on which our Empire is founded."
"Is that acceptable, Aristocras?" Jaina looked to Formbi and Aplano with an inscrutable expression. "Assistant Syndic Fel takes over as leadership of the Chiss sector. And knowing him, he won't even have you former heads of state executed."
"That would be appreciated," Formbi said sarcastically. "There's still a matter of the millions of Chiss prisoners of war."
"Right, well, since they're still being held in this sector. Their fates would be in the ruling Moff's hands," Turi gestured to an impassive Jagged.
The Chiss delegation glanced at Jagged for a long moment, before they all reluctantly nodded. "Do our Imperial counterparts agree to the Jedi's plan?"
Moff Lecersen and Admiral Pryl looked to one and other in silent conference. After a few hushed whispered, Drikl Lecersen nodded. "In light of the threat that now faces both our peoples, and possibly the

entire galaxy. We do. The sooner order is restored, the faster we can prepare for the threat the Jedi say is coming."
"Let's get a hypercomm to Taspir so the Grand Moff can give his okay," Turi said to Jaina.
With another push of a button the map was replaced by an out-going call message. In another moment, the mustache and goateed leader of the Imperial Remnant appeared.
"Grand Moff," Jaina's smile was artificially polite. "Thank you for answering."
"*I was expecting the call after I learned you returned from whatever mission you were on, Ambassador Solo. What can I do for you?"* Quille's graciousness was just as false as Jaina's.
"What would you say if I told you I could give you the Ascendancy without another shot being fired."
"*If it were anyone but a Solo telling me this, I would sincerely doubt it. What will it cost the Empire in turn?"*
"Not much. Cease hostilities, agree to protect this part of space like the rest of your Empire, oh and appoint Jagged Fel as Moff of the region instead of one of your usual flunkies."
"The Imperial Jedi will stay on hand to ensure that he adheres to the Empire's wishes," Turi added calmly.
Quille's only show of emotion was a raised eyebrow. "*And the Chiss will become part of the Empire just like that?"*
"Just like that. The remaining Ascendancy leadership can vouch for me," Jaina gestured to the two Aristocras.
"It will have to be ratified by the Assembly. But given the alternative, I think they'll agree," Formbi agreed.
Quille was silent for a long moment. Seasoned politician that he was, he betrayed nothing as he studied a datapad of information. Finally, he inclined his head. "*I expect the terms of the Ascendancy's surrender and integration into the Empire on my desk in two hours. Provisionally, Jagged Fel, the Chiss territories are yours. Please take the time to look over Imperial Regulations, laws, and taxes so that we can keep their space as civilized as the rest of the Empire."*
"As you say, Grand Moff," Jagged said stone-faced.
"There is also a matter of the Killiks," Jaina said quickly. "Since the Chiss territories are now a part of the Empire, we will need reinforcements to deal with the impending threat at our doorstep. We know for a fact that the Killiks will not stop here, so if you don't wish the interior of the Empire to be threatened any help you send will be appreciated."

Moff Quille eyed Jaina appraisingly. "*Well played, Ambassador Solo. It is clear you've learned a thing or two from your mother."*
"Thank you," Jaina smiled tightly. "Our reinforcements?"
"*I am sending another battle group led by Admiral Reige to Chiss space,"* Moff Quille answered.
"Just like that?" Jaina asked.
"*Just like that."* Quille rejoined. "*Unlike the Galactic Alliance, the Empire likes to see that its armed forces receive the appropriate materiel and support."*
"Much appreciated, Grand Moff." Jaina said with genuine appreciation.
"*Good luck with the battle, Ambassador Solo. Let me be the first to welcome you both to the Empire,"* Quille then reached over and ended the communications.
"Well," Jaina clapped her hands together. "Looks like we have the beginnings of a plan. Moff Lecersen, Admiral Pryl, are you familiar with this Admiral Reige?"
"Vitor Reige," Lecersen nodded. "He's a Vong war veteran, supporter of Gilad Pellaeon."
"Being shipped out here so he can't cause any trouble," Turi added, looking at the Moff meaningfully.
Lecersen's face soured, but he confirmed her statement. "He's recently been petitioning for Ephin Sarreti's reinstatement as a Moff and is one of the more politically active admirals. Some thought he'd be the next Grand Admiral despite his relatively young age."
"Great, sounds like just the kind of guy we need," Jaina said brightly. "Now let's hope he'll get sent over with more than a token taskforce. We're going to need all the ships we can get."
"Speaking of ships," Turi spoke up. She exchanged a knowing nod with Admiral Pryl. "If we can find some way to free Moff Tanal's force from the dead-end they drove into, we'll have another sixty or so vessels on our side. The Empire will also be very grateful of the return of their ships."
"Sixty vessels and a disgruntled Moff," Jagged pointed out.
"That's easily remedied," Moff Lecersen looked to Turi. "Would the Imperial Jedi mind going over there and fetching Evelyn? Someone needs to tell her the war is over. Can't have her blowing up Imperial assets if she somehow frees herself without help."
"We'll get on it," Turi smirked smugly. "Do the Chiss have any ideas on how to unstuck the fleet?"
Aristocra Formbi raised a blue eyebrow before tilting his head in the direction of the Chiss Force sensitives. "People of our age, especially

you Jedi, are from a different generation of warfare. They did not do anything that couldn't be undone."
"You have a plan, some tech or something?" Turi said brightly.
Chiss Jedi Antaria Wellos smiled enigmatically. "Or something. Despite the years, I would not condemn all those souls to a lonely death simply because we were at war. There is a way, but we will need the assistance of your Jedi."
"Of course, whatever we can do to help," Turi said, before the rest of her delegation could speak.
"I suppose someone should go tell Denon and whatever's left of the Senate about what's happening out here too," Jaina sighed.
"Given how this sector now has its Moff, I'll be recalled to govern my own territories again," Lecersen spoke up. "I'll relay the message once I return to civilized space."
"What shall the Vagaari do in the meantime?" Elansh spoke up.
Jaina inclined her head briefly. "Stay on station for the next few days. We need to convince the rest of the Ascendancy that surrendering to the Empire is the only way they'll stay alive. Just the threat of an Imperial-Vagaari invasion while they are at their weakest will be enough, especially with the remaining Aristocras advocating our preferred course of action. Once Jagged has solidified control of the Chiss government, we'll need you on the out in front. Your people know the Unknown Regions even better than the Chiss and are probably aware of hyperspace routes we haven't discovered yet. We know the Killiks are coming, we need to find out where and how. The CEDF will be out there right along with you. The more information we have the better."
"Can we use some of those hyperspace-lane-collapsing bombs you used on Evelyn's fleet?" Turi looked to the Chiss.
"We only had the prototype," Kung'urama answered with a shake of his head.. "Even we did not expect it to work as well as it had."
"It will take considerable time to build another," Aristocra Aplono spoke. "The materials required were extracted and distilled from the remains of Yuuzhan Vong vessels. There were many failures before the prototype."
"We have several months," Jaina reminded.
"I will see what we can do. It will help if the Empire releases the Inrokini prisoners. They are our science and tech-division after all."
"I will see to it the moment I can," Jagged answered, bowing his head slightly.
Jaina then clasped her hands behind her back, injecting the Force into her words to emphasize her point. "Alright people! We have a limited

amount of time to get all three of your groups working together even when they all hate each other's guts. Use every ounce of influence you have, all your favors and your credits if you have to. Because if you don't, there won't be a point in saving them up. We're the only thing standing between the giant fleet of bugs and the rest of the unprepared galaxy, so let's not let anyone down."

[.:(III):.]

"You sure you don't want a change in wardrobe? I have a tailor who's really good with custom-made Jedi robes, and you are kind of an Imperial Jedi now." Turi whispered. "Forget the boring browns and tans. Black and Imperial red really is the style for the young Jedi these days."

"I think I'll give my dad a heart-attack if I holo-call him in Imperial uniform," Jaina chuckled softly.

"I don't know. Add some eye-liner and develop a brooding the-galaxy-hates-me look, and you'll fit right in."

"Any idea on how the Chiss plan to un-stuck the Imp fleet?"

"Not a clue," Turi shrugged. "I know as much as you—that they requested all the Force users we could spare. The three units of Imperial Jedi in Chiss space are here. Though they're all just kids, and Unit Three had to be brought in from the Marquarra fortress. Rahm's here. You're here. Unit Three's Alexander Astin is here. Heck, even I'm here although I'm rubbish at using the Force at anything other than augmenting my words. They even requested that Vagaari girl, Ms. Grand Overseer, to be here. But she couldn't leave her duties as the leader of her people."

"Her mom and grandfather were Force-sensitive," Jaina supplied, in one of the turbolifts of Jagged's flagship, the *Eternal Dynast*. After the ceasefire had been arranged, one of the first orders of business was to rescue Moff Tanal's fleet. Both Aristocras had returned to Csilla to soothe aggravated nerves, and it was Jaina's job to soothe Imperial nerves by giving them their lost fleet back. For some reason, the Empire was always more cooperative when they had weapons of mass destruction under their control. As a sign of good-will, and because of politics, the ships going to rescue the Imperial fleet were all CEDF. Secretly, Jaina didn't think that having non-humans rescue die-hard xenophobes would improve the situation much, but one could always hope. "I think she has potential, just never found the time to check. I was spending most of it running around trying to beat those odds."

"Yup, definitely don't envy your job. At least in my battlefields, if you piss off someone, all they can do is glare at you and say mean things. For you, a pissed off someone means blasters, lightsabers, and probable death."

The doors to the lift opened and they stepped out into the hangar bay. Awaiting them were pretty much all of the identified Force-sensitives in Chiss space. Most of them were at the very edge of the hangar by the mag-con field. One, however, was awaiting them as they stepped out.
"How are things on up high?" Rahm asked, greeting them with a brief salute.
"Just peachy," Turi replied, returning the salute in Imperial military fashion. "When we arrived on the *Blood Fin*, we learned that Moff Tanal was brought up on charges of incompetence and shot by her own people. We then had to convince the rest of the captains not to kill us two and promise that we'd be back for them. Oh, and most of the captains are loyal to Grand Moff Quille, so we fully expect something underhanded to happen if we use their ships; and we can't do anything about it because we *need* those ships. Soooo, peachy."
"Sucks to be you," Rahm laughed softly.
"Thanks, partner," Turi said sarcastically. She put her fingers together and Rahm yelped at the Force-flick that boinked off his forehead.
"Hey, that's my thing."
"Like a good Imperial, I reappropriated it for myself, live with it Marek," Turi said with a smug smile.
"So, you two…huh," Jaina said with a smile of her own.
"What! No," Turi said quickly, her eyes bulging slightly. "No, no, no, no. I mean, it's not like that. He and I are just…well…co-workers. We formed the bond because of the stresses of the job."
"What she said," Rahm said, his tone light. "Considering she was the only person who had a shot at drawing the war out until you got back, she needed all the support I could give her. Which, sadly, wasn't much."
"Don't sell yourself short, Marek," Turi rolled her eyes. "Without his help, I'd have gone mental."
"I know the feeling," Jaina empathized. Then, with a grin. "So you're sure it's strictly platonic? Not even a hint, an iota of something more?"
"Absolutely, positively none," Turi nodded fervently, some color coming to her pale cheeks.
"Thanks for saying that so quickly, Altamik," Rahm deadpanned.
"Shut it. You're repulsive and you know it," Turi bantered. "Besides, if anything, it's me not you. Oh Sith spit, did I really just say that? I meant, I'm not exactly relationship material. I'm sure you can do much better than me, Marek."
"Probably," Rahm nodded.
"Bastard, you weren't supposed to agree so quickly."

Jaina continued to smile on the inside at the two younger Jedi. At least one bright thing had come out of the brief Chiss-Imperial war.
Her thoughts turned back to her own partner in crime; someone she had just gotten promoted to the Moff of over a dozen star systems. He might not be the most emotionally expressive, but she knew she had his support, that he had her back when things came down to the line. Just like she had his. He had helped her get through some of her roughest moments during the Vong War, taught her that it was okay to care, to feel. To live life while she could and be more than just a sword. He might not be Force-sensitive, but Jaina didn't care. She was aware of his feelings for herself, just like she made sure he was aware of her own for him.
She walked behind Mallie and Rahm, letting them continue their banter until they met up with the rest of the Imperial Jedi. The leader of Unit Three, code-named Black Heart Squadron, was Alexander Astin; the son of former Inquisitorius member Jaalib Brandl and Rebellion-era Jedi Fable Astin. At twenty-one years of age, Alexander was one of the many Force-neutrals Turi had tapped when the Imperial Jedi Academy had been started. He had his mother's last name because his father didn't want him 'tainted' by the connotations that came with the last name of Brandl. Jaalib's own father, Alexander's grandfather, personally and with great zeal served Palpatine and was responsible for the deaths of many, many people. Jaina could definitely relate to that.
"Astin," Turi greeted politely. Given how Alexander's students were still eleven to thirteen years old, he often trained them in separate areas from the older ones trained by Rahm and herself. "Nice of you to make it. Hope the trip from the Marquarra wasn't too boring."
"Turi, it's a genu~ine pleasure to see you again." Alexander returned the polite nod. Despite being raised in Imperial space, his accent had a slight drawl that was more commonly heard in the Colonies region of the galaxy. "The trip was uneventful, just the way we Black Hearts like it. Kind of you to end the war for us."
"I had time on my hands. Besides, someone has to keep up with the Solos."
Alexander followed Turi's gesture, and his eyes widened slightly. He then developed a rueful grin and ran a hand through his dark hair before holding a hand out for Jaina to shake. "Well I'll be...Jaina Solo, hero of the light in the flesh. My little brother practically idolizes you. You mind signing…well…I guess later, all I have on me is my lightsaber."

"Not a problem," Jaina chuckled at the younger Jedi's embarrassed expression. "Your brother have a name?"
"Arecelis," Alexander answered. "Named after a friend of my mom."
"That makes you Alexander Astin and Arecelis Astin?"
"I think my parents just like the letter 'Aurek'."
They felt the two Chiss Jedi enter the hangar from another turbolift and went quiet. There was something about the senior Chiss that spoke of the experience and memories that would never be forgotten and always learned from. Though Antaria wore a peasant's garb—a rough hemp tunic—and Kung'urama wore an aged Chiss military outfit, both radiated power and intelligence.
Antaria moved to the front of the seated Imperial Jedi, evaluating each without saying a word. Kung'urama silently stayed at the back with his arms folded in front of him.
Finally, Chiss Jedi Antaria looked up to Turi, Rahm, and Alexander.
"They have harnessed the dark side in the past?"
"They've been trained to face their emotions, not hide it away," Turi confirmed.
"Good, because they will need that abilities for what we are about to do."
"And that would be?"
"A technique used by very few Jedi in the past due to its dangerous potential and corrupting nature," Antaria eyed the young teens and almost-teens again, then looked back to the instructors. "What we are do has several names. Among them being Force Wormhole, or Force Hyperspace-Lane. A utilization of the shifting and often chaotic nature of the Force to transport one group from one part of the galaxy to another."
"That sounds like something Emperor Palpatine did when he kidnapped Uncle Luke." Jaina voiced.
Anataria nodded. "Another reason why Jedi do not use this abilities is because it takes them perilously close to the dark side. For those using the dark side for the first time, it often ends up being their undoing. But you, you Imperial Jedi and those who have used the darker side of the Force in the past, you know what the temptation feels like and can resist it."
"But we don't even know where to start," a blond-haired thirteen year old of Black Heart squadron spoke up. His face was that of a child emerging into adolescence, making him look younger. "Tearing a hole in space, that's lightyears beyond lifting rocks and starting fires."
"Master Yoda once had a saying," Kung'urama answered. "'Size matters not.' It does not matter whether we're lifting rocks or opening

wormholes, what matters is that you believe you can do it. Believing is half the battle. The very first hyperdrives were in fact powered by the Force. In this case, Antaria and myself will only need you to lend your strength and feelings. We will do the rest."
The group turned their attention to the view of the stars outside the magnetic containment field. It was hard to fathom that several dozen lightyears away was an Imperial fleet marooned in an unstable patch of galaxy, and that they were about to retrieve said fleet.
"Tell us what to do," Jaina nodded once, before the young teens could get overwhelmed by what might occur.
Antaria's eyes glinted. "Very well. Like all storms, the emotions of anger, of fear, of passion, is required. But they must be controlled. Equal parts discipline must go along with the rage. Focus is also necessary. As if you are a set of reactors, each of you will steadily channel your abilities. The dark and the light. Only balanced will this work."
"Okay Imperial Jedi," Jaina smiled. "Show me everything these reprobate Jedi have taught you."
"Oh we intend to, ma'am," Alexander said, winking at his charges. "Won't we Vetter, Sinde?"
"Yup," the two almost-teens grinned.
"Don't call me 'ma'am' again," Jaina rolled her eyes. "You're not in my chain of command, and it makes me feel old."
"Imperial Knights, time to impress the Sword of the Jedi Jaina Solo with our un-Jedi ways," Turi clapped her hands together.
"I guess we'll pitch in," Rahm sat by his apprentices.
"Why not," Alexander answered with a shrug. "Not everyday we get to channel both light and dark in one meditation and not get scolded by Jedi or Sith."
"Jedi *and* Sith," Rahm pointed out.
"Point," Alexander grinned. "Black Hearts, let's show the older ones how it's done."
For her part, Jaina stood back and watched with a clinical detachment. Having been raised by the Solo-Skywalker diet of Force lessons, the dark side was always something she had been warned about. She wasn't as wary of it as her brothers might have been at one point, heck she even threw a bit of lightning about during the war when she had been worried sick about her brothers. But at the same time, she couldn't exactly get over her life-time of indoctrination that the dark side was something to be avoided and not used.
It was a strange thing, feeling the Force shift as the six young Imperial Jedi and their three instructors began their meditations. So used to the

light side of the Force, to the horrors she had experienced in the Yuuzhan Vong War, that she at first didn't recognize the malevolent energies of the dark side. For all the warnings she had received about it, it didn't feel all that bad to her. It was heat without the burn, echoes of past times complete with the emotions, an all encompassing blackness that was calming at the same time.

"Controlled chaos," Turi intoned softly as she sat and joined the others. Her Force presence shifted as the Force began to channel through her. "Action, but tempered with reason. Fear, yet balanced by knowledge. Hatred, rage, moderated by compassion and your desire to protect. A Jedi knows the benefits of harmony. A dark Jedi knows the benefits of desire and passion. Using one we are incomplete, but used together, we are stronger. We are balanced."

The Force-sensitives in the hangar were truly walking that 'gray' area where the light and dark sides of the Force met. For those like Jaina who could see the Force, the auras of the Imperial Jedi were shimmering fields of gold and purple energy; light in balance with the dark. The power flowed through the young Force-users and began to steadily stream towards the two Chiss leading them.

The two Chiss closed their eyes for a long moment, absorbing the energy being sent to them. When their red eyes opened again, they were shimmering with the built up Force energy. As one, both Chiss Jedi thrust their hands out towards the void of space.

It was as if a Force bomb had gone off, the very fabric of the inky, starry backdrop ripping open in a violent explosion of lightning and swirling energy. The bright blue vortex of hyperspace bathed the hangar bay in its azure light, the stars stretched on into infinity. Both Chiss, though their faces were calm, struggled to continue the spiraling passageway.

"More dark side," Antaria gritted out. "We need more control."

"Ambassador Solo, counteract our input, please," Rahm requested, his Force-presence shifting. Tendrils of envy and desire began to radiate from him as the golden glow that surrounded him became more muted. Several of the Imperial Jedi followed suit, fear and hatred becoming more pronounced.

Jaina, who was barely able to keep up with the mystical aspects of what was happening, was grateful for the direction. Adding her own considerable strength to the bonfire of Force energy, Jaina matched the output of the other Jedi to maintain the balance of the meld.

Outside, the wormhole threatened to swallow the ship whole, but the Chiss Jedi managed to somehow push it further away. The edges of the wormhole continued to flash and flare with white lightning, micro-

explosions rippling and swirling in a devastating display of Force energies.
A mental message was sent to the bridge of the ship, and that followed a comm-message through the stars. Seconds passed, and then the first ships of former Moff Tanal's fleet began to emerge. Star Destroyers, cruisers, light-assault craft, multiple ships at a time. Like ghosts they re-entered real-space and promptly burned jets away from the swirling passageway as quick as they could.
"We cannot control the storm much longer," Kung'urama grunted, sweat beading on his face.
"Just a little longer," Jaina murmured, awed by what was being accomplished.
The edges of the wormhole began to flicker, threatening to close in on itself.
"Only a quarter of the fleet is through," Turi swore.
Jaina's jaw clenched. The Imperials would not be in a cooperative mood if the Chiss failed to rescue the entire fleet. She hadn't come all this way, gone through one neck-risking adventure after the next, only to be stopped by this. Never one for the intricate side of the Force like Jacen was, or for inventive ways to use it like Anakin, Jaina always saw herself as a battering ram when it came to her troubles. If presented with a locked door, Jacen would find the person with the key, Anakin would pick the lock, but she would blast the door down. And what her current situation called for was a blast of Force energy to keep things working.
Silently, she analyzed what the Chiss Jedi were doing, seeing how they tore open the very fabric of space to open the conduit between systems. It was a violent use of the Force that required infinite amounts of will, yet also required one to be centered and in tune with themselves so that violent use didn't destroy the caster. Despite the situation, Jaina had no problem with either. She knew she was as stubborn as any Jedi thanks to her mom and dad.
"I'm taking over," Jaina announced, the wormhole continuing to shrink in size.
"You do not know what to…"
Jaina held out both hands and the Force erupted around her in a white-gold nimbus of light; waves of Force energy pouring off her and buffeting the others around her. She held nothing back, her desire for success overwhelming any morale quibbles and helping her visualize the Force as one whole and not as light or dark. Her aura pulsated outwards, lifting her body off the deck and causing her brown hair and Jedi robes to flutter wildly in a Force-generated breeze.

Reaching out, she wrenched control of the wormhole from the two Chiss and began taming the wild and shifting passageway through sheer will. What the wormhole needed was raw power, and descending from the Skywalker line, she had plenty of that. Normally channeled into her muscles and lightsaber or piloting skills, the abundance of energy that made her a lethal warrior was now free to leave her slender form.

The swirling hyperspace lane outside shuddered at the new influx of energy and began to stabilize once more.

The Imperial ships continued to come through, now in bigger groups as the ones who went first sent word of their survival.

"Two-thirds through, Solo." Turi's voice was a distant whisper in Jaina's ear. The glow from the Imperial Jedi's contributions seemed to pale in comparison, but they continued to feed their strength into the bright nova of Jaina's aura.

Brown eyes closed and her being focused on the task at hand, Jaina reveled in the warmth of the Force coursing through her body. Controlling the wormhole was like trying to ride several bucking stallions at the same time. A seemingly impossible task that required insane amounts of strength and balance. She could feel her very cells threaten to burst from the energy, but she stubbornly held on. Willing the last of the Imperial ships through, Jaina pushed out everything she had.

"They're out!" Turi yelled. "You can close it."

Jaina wanted to respond, but the Force continued to flow in and through her, the heat of it growing more intense by the second. She could feel herself slipping away, her relief that she had done her job making her exhaustion even stronger.

"Sithspawn! She's burning out!" Alexander yelled. "My brother's gonna have my head if Jaina Solo dies on my watch!"

"I've got this," Rahm stood up, the Force still boiling off him in malevolent purple and black waves.

"Marek?" Turi looked to the younger blond Jedi.

"What about the wormhole?" Alexander gestured. "It looks like it's about to going berserk."

"We have that, deal with the young Solo," Kung'urama said firmly. He and Antaria were already seizing control and closing the portal. "The galaxy is not yet ready for the sacrifice she's obviously willing to make."

"Marek?" Turi repeated. But the son of Juno and Galen was already approaching Jaina. His eyes were icy and cold, his pale skin seemingly lighter than normal.

"Jaina Solo, forgive me," Rahm said. And before anyone could stop him, he activated his lightsaber and stabbed it into Jaina's floating figure. The backlash of Force energy sent both him and Jaina flying in opposite directions, their bodies little more than limp heaps.
"Marek!"
"Solo!"
"My brother's going to kill me!"
Jaina groaned. From feeling like a hundred billion credits to feeling like she was buried under said credits, her body did not appreciate the sudden shift. Every muscle ached and refused to respond, her mind felt as if it had been flash-fried.
Weakly, she opened her eyes. Kneeling over her was an incredulous Turi.
"You know, I've always heard stories about you Solos. But seeing it in person was more than ridiculous," Turi remarked with a faint, relieved grin.
"What happened?" Jaina croaked.
"Nearly disintegrated yourself with the Force trying to save those Imperials," Turi rolled her eyes. She held out a hand and helped Jaina to her feet.
Jaina nodded numbly, then remembered something. "Wait a minute, did Rahm stab me?"
"Blew up my lightsaber," Rahm answered, still prone and with his two apprentices gathered over him. "And my hand."
Jaina's eyes darted to Rahm's right hand and saw a bloody stump where his hand and wrist should have been. Everything below the elbow was gone.
Jaina paled slightly. "Rahm?"
"Extra energy had to go somewhere, and I sure as heck couldn't take it," Rahm answered, his breathing shallow. "Try not to do it again, I only have one good hand left."
"Get him to the med-bay," Turi barked at Rahm's apprentices, her own green eyes widening at the realization of how injured he was.
Jaina swallowed. "The wormhole?"
"Closed," Kung'urama answered, red eyes focused on Jaina in a penetrating stare. "Thanks to you."
"I didn't do much," Jaina said, shaking her head. "Now that we have the Imperial fleet back, the real challenge begins. The Ascendancy is not going to disband willingly or change their ways overnight, not with all the politics involved. No amount of Force magic is going to change that."
Kung'urama raised a blue eyebrow. "We shall see."

"You know something I don't?"
"Several things, probably. But, Jedi Solo, you know more than enough. Shall we return to Csilla? We have bad news to deliver to the Assembly."
"Before Grand Moff Quille has a change of heart," Jaina nodded. "Turi, go ahead and check up on Rahm. Let me know how he's doing. Imperial Jedi, great job keeping the balance and all that. Alexander, they're yours until Rahm and Turi return."
"Thanks for not dying," Alexander tipped an imaginary hat. "Want them to do anything in particular?"
"Take them to the commissary and get them something to eat, the food's on you," Jaina deadpanned.
"Wait a sec. You want me to feed six teenagers who just burned off hundreds of calories with that little Force exercise?" Alexander paled.
"Feed us," the aforementioned teens intoned in Force-assisted unison, hands stretched out like walking corpses.
"And you?" Turi asked.
"I'll be on the bridge keeping the Imps happy."
"Good luck," Turi said wryly. "You're going to need it."
"They're nothing," Jaina said. She felt exhausted but knew she had little time to sleep. "It's keeping the Chiss, Vagaari, *and* Imps the real challenge."
"Like I said earlier, I definitely don't envy your job."
[.:(IV):.]
"Ready for this, Jag?" Jaina murmured, feeling the icy cold air of Csilla wash over her exposed face. Her breath came out in a small cloud of vapor, and her face was framed by a fur-lined hood. Her slim figure was cloaked only in her finest of Jedi cloaks, the Force keeping her warm in the sub-zero temperatures.
They were once again in front of the capital building, but the atmosphere was entirely different than their last visit. Whereas before their fates had been controlled by the Chiss government, now the reverse was true. Whether the Chiss survived was solely based on whether or not she and Jag could convince them to finally admit defeat. The remaining members of the Chiss senate, and the surviving family heads and Syndics had all arrived in orderly fashion, definitely not missing both the Vagaari and Imperial fleets in orbit as they did so. It had taken the scattered ruling families and heads of families over a week to gather on Csilla, many at first fearing a trap. But when there were no further skirmishes or planetary bombardments, they warily made their way back to the capital of the Ascendancy.

Jaina turned her head slightly to gauge Jagged's expression. In the background, the white and blue city lights glimmered across the frosted surface of the planet like diamonds, bathing the city in an ethereal glow.
Jagged, his pale face a blue hue from the reflection of the ice all around them, tilted his head slightly. "Ready, no. Very few are ready for such burdens."
"I'm sorry."
"Do not be. You are correct in that this course of action was the most prudent one given our time constraints and other factors. Even then, peace and victory is not guaranteed. There will no doubt be factions of Chiss who will resent a human overseer. No doubt threats from both the known and unknown parts of the galaxy that will vex us in time. I will be dealing with the Chiss government, the Imperial government, and no doubt the Vagaari once they have re-established themselves. But I at least know that you will be at my side for much of it."
"All of it, flyboy," Jaina corrected with a half-smile. "No way I'm going to leave you in this mess I helped to create."
"I stand corrected." Jagged inclined his head briefly. He then frowned, his forehead furrowing. "It seems the Solos have made giving impossible gifts a tradition."
"Huh?"
"Your younger brother gives his future wife a hybrid spaceship. Your twin gives his lover an heir and goes to her rescue with an entire battle group. And you give me a high office in one of the galaxy's superpowers; complete with planets, fleets, and all the perks that come with being a Moff. I know your father gave your mother Dathomir, but you've given me control of over a dozen systems and the planets within."
"I'm sure you'll think of something, Jag," Jaina laughed, patting his arm sympathetically. "Besides, you're not Moff quite yet. We still have to get the Chiss to acknowledge you."
"It probably helps that when we enter the parliament chambers, we'll have CEDF marines flanking us. That and three fleets with weapons ready in orbit."
"Who would have thought we'd be part of a coup?"
"You're a Solo. Your life wouldn't be complete without one."
"And you're an Antilles, rebelling is in your blood."
"Don't let father hear you say that," Jagged said.
"How many sides has he been on? He actually had Imperial and New Republic experts agreeing for once. What did they call him? I think it was the 'consummate turn-coat'?"

"He prefers the term 'survivor'. Just like your father prefers the term 'goods acquisition expert' over smuggler."
"Okay, how about you?"
"Me?"
"Yup," Jaina said, feeling a little playful despite the somber mood. "I'm a goddess, dad's a 'goods acquisition expert', your dad's a 'survivor'. So what are you? 'My sister-in-law prefers tall-dark-and-clawcrafty, so that might work. It's a bit of a mouthful though."
"I think there are benefits to having your sister-in-laws on opposite sides of the galaxy," Jagged deadpanned.
The light mood was interrupted, however, as the doors to the capital opened and a phalanx of Chiss soldiers emerged.
"Assistant Syndic Fel,"
"Security Chief Kthira'shi'ktarloo" Jagged inclined his head in greeting. "They're ready for you."
Jaina didn't even need to glance over her shoulder to see the seven squads of soldiers behind her. Five of the squads were CEDF marines loyal to Jag. One was an elite team of Voidtroopers, their black armor imposing in the darkness of the night. The last was a squad of Vagaari warriors.
All had been idle until that moment. Now they were snapping to formation, weapons slung over their shoulders. The message they presented was clear. Even if the Ascendancy politicians didn't want to, the military was no longer on their side.
"Thank you," Jagged said politely. Matching strides, he and Jaina ascended the steps to the capital building. "Were there any difficulties?"
"I believe the heads of the families, Syndics, and Cabinet members all saw reason on their way here," Ashik said sarcastically. "You do have a battalion of hover-tanks, several squadrons of fighters, and Vagaari warriors all around the several city blocks that surround this building. Even if their House Phalanxes wanted to act, they're outnumbered and outgunned, and know it."
"That is good, it prevents them from committing to foolish acts that will take up time we do not have," Jagged replied evenly. The sound of heavy boots marching in unison emphasized their approach. The building's security forces parted, standing to the side without protest and forming an honor guard to the front door.
"If you say so, I'm just a soldier," Ashik shrugged.
"I was just a soldier too."
"I thought so too. What happened?"

"My girlfriend promoted me to politician," Jagged replied monotonously.
"I'll make a note never to get one then."
"Your wife would kill you," Jaina agreed.
They fell silent as they passed through the main door and into the plaza. Like usual, the unofficial 'no-having-fun- in-the-building' rule came into effect. Jagged and Jaina's faces could have been carved into stone as their led their seven squadrons through the packed hallways. Both Jagged's white cape and Jaina's brown robes fluttered with every step, the heels of their boots clicking against the floor in unison. Watching them were security forces from various families, lesser politicians, and notable Chiss citizens. Low whispers and conversation rippled through the crowd, anger and tension palpable. The Ascendancy had stood for millennia, seemed untouchable, but in the span of a single night, was about to be finished. Jaina could feel the fear of the unknown, the hatred at being so helpless, rage that two humans were about to dictate Chiss policy. Despite the emotions flying about, however, the Chiss on the sidelines remained where they were, knowing there was little they could do.
Almost as if planned, as Jaina and Jagged neared the senate chambers, the squads following them began to peel off, taking position in the hallway and barring the approach of anyone else. Jaina and Jagged continued on, reaching the ornate metal doors of the senate room and pushing them open.
A plethora of red eyes immediately darted in their direction. Unlike the senate chambers of the Galactic Alliance on Denon, Csilla's senate chamber was tiny in comparison. Three rows of seats arrayed in a horseshoe-like shape on a stepped platform ringed a modest hall, with a single dais in the center. It would have taken many dozens of the room to fill even a fraction of the Galactic Alliance senate chamber. But the closeness of it all, when combined with how the Chiss representatives were allowed to gaze down at whoever was in the center of the room, added to the intimidation factor.
Not that Jaina or Jagged were intimidated.
"Thank you for coming," Aristocra Formbi said dryly.
Jaina inclined her head, ignoring the plasteel chair in the central dais. "Thanks for having us."
"Shall we get down to the matter at hand?" Aristocra Aplano said tersely.
"Yes, lets," Jagged answered back. He tilted his head up and made eye-contact with those in the room. "The decision is a simple one. If you wish to continue from this point on as the Ascendancy, you will not

only have doomed your species, but greatly endangered the rest of the galaxy. If you vote to dissolve the Ascendancy today, you will be preserving not only your lives, but the Chiss culture as well. The Empire is willing to cease all hostilities and help safeguard Chiss space, but only if the Chiss leadership agrees to it."
"What you are suggesting is tantamount to a coup, Fel," one of the Syndics sneered. "You cannot just march in here and force us to surrender to you at blaster point. Aristocra Aplano explained the deal, control of our lives would be ceded to you and whatever whims the Empire can come up with."
"And at the moment, those whims involve letting you live your lives as normal, only under Imperial rule,." Jagged said. "I'm sure you realize that the Empire has no desire to be out here any longer than they have to be. Continue to resist and you give them a reason to come down even harder. I am asking you to dissolve the Ascendancy because it is what's best for the galaxy as a whole."
"What you ask is no simple thing," one of the family heads swallowed nervously. "You ask us to turn our back on millennia of tradition. To abandon everything that makes us Chiss. The Ascendancy has stood for thousands of years, our ancestors and families gave it life. You're asking us to be the generation that ends all that. We are *Chiss*, Jagged Fel. Chiss. You might not understand that because you are human, but that means something. I might be speaking for some, if not all of us when I say we'd rather die as Chiss than live a day as a pale shadow of the people we are."
The response came not from Jagged or Jaina, but from the time-worn voice of another Chiss. Stepping out of the shadows, Kung'urama'nuruodo used the Force to draw attention to himself. He was dressed in Jedi robes, something Jaina hadn't recalled seeing him in before. "But we already *are* pale shadows of the people we once were, head of the Cidori family. We just do not realize it."
"This coming from a relic of a bygone era," another shot back. "As much as we respect your service to the Ascendancy, Kung'urama, your time has passed."
"Indeed. Much like your own," Kung'urama stood on Jagged's opposite side. "Leaders of the Ascendancy, allow me to show you the truth about our people, about what we can be, and compare that to what we are today."
There was a groundswell of Force energy that stirred up the icy air in the room into a polar vortex. The Force coursed from the older Jedi and bathed everyone in the room in its light. Red eyes became distant as memories and emotions played in their minds. They experienced entire

lifetimes in the blink of an eye, saw the Ascendancy at its prime and saw its gradual collapse. The Force continued to billow around them all, a golden-white light brightening the icy metal chamber as the Chiss Jedi Flow-Walked the assembly through the history of their people. Before Jaina could even ask the Chiss Jedi what he was doing, the Force receded from the room. And then Jaina blinked and frowned. She was no longer sensing the Force coming from the Chiss Jedi.
"The stage is yours now, young Jedi," Kung'urama murmured, his voice hoarse. The others in the room were still in a state of shock, absorbing everything they had just seen.
"What did you do?" Jaina whispered, eyes wide.
"The Force is the past, it is the present, and the future. The Force is in everything. I never truly understood those lessons when I was a padawan. Too impatient I guess," Kung'urama breathed out heavily, the imposing and muscular Jedi looking much weaker than Jaina could ever remember seeing. "But for those in the room to see the truth, I needed to be their conduit. Unfortunately, to bring so many minds back so many years, this old and scarred body of mine …. Heh, I've been wanting to say this line since I was a boy. I'm getting too old for this."
"You…what did you do?"
"Nothing more than needed to be done, young, Jedi." Kung'urama sunk to his knees, his eyes fluttering close. He, however, was smiling. "But the price was not so great. What is one life compared to the future of my people?"
"Kung'urama," Jaina quickly knelt to catch him as he fell backwards.
"It's okay," Kung'urama breathed out, his expression peaceful. "I am a Jedi after all, Jaina Solo. Your actions reminded me of that."
"You were right, you know," Jaina murmured. "What I was taught…"
"Differed from what you have learned?"
"Yeah."
"Good," Kung'urama nodded once, his voice fading. "Take care of my people, Jaina Solo. Jagged Fel. And remember, the Force will be with you, always."
There was another swell of Force, but this time Kung'urama's body disappeared in the soft golden glow leaving only his worn Jedi clothing behind.
Jagged looked back to the Chiss leadership, his face as impassive as ever. Unlike before, they looked back, but almost shamefully, embarrassed. Many looked haunted, having seen dozens of their predecessors' lives and the many proceedings that had taken place in the chamber in only a few seconds. They had seen the Ascendancy at

its highest point, and were keenly aware how low they had fallen to. Where the Ascendancy had over a dozen Ruling Families, there were now only two Aristocra in the room. Where they had once been masters of their own space, they were now at the mercy of outside forces. Thousands of years and they saw the gradual decline of the government that was their very identity.
"Does anyone else need to die for peace to be achieved?" Jagged asked in a steady voice.
Heads were shaken all around.
"Then," Formbi cleared his throat, his eyes not leaving Kung'urama's robes. "Let us vote to dissolve the Ascendancy and select Assistant Syndic Jagged Fel as our leader until such time another solution is needed. All in favor?"
Hands were raised unanimously.
"Then as of this moment, the Chiss Ascendancy is no longer. Your orders, sir?"
Jagged stepped up and rested his hands on the railing surrounding the central dais. "Heads of families return to your homeworlds and take inventory of what we have available. Prepare to begin construction of additional shipyards in systems to be announced after said inventory of our resources The war with the Empire may be over, but we still have the Killik fleet to contend with. Issue a mandatory draft for all Chiss of fighting age. They can be kept in reserve to protect your homeworlds, but we need everyone who can fight to fight. Syndics, begin coordination of trade, military maneuvers, and other sectors with the Imperial officers and Moff Lecersen. The Chiss may be at their lowest at the moment, but in a way that is a good thing."
"It is?" former Aristocra Aplano frowned.
"Yes," Jagged met the man's gaze. "It means that we can only go upwards from here. I want all high-ranking Chiss officers to meet with me in three-hours' time. All other leaders are to continue their duties unless instructed otherwise."
The Chiss assembly stood as one and saluted sharply. "As you command, Moff Fel."
[.:(Chapter End):.]

Jagged
[.:(I):.]
Jagged Fel considered himself a rational man. A dutiful man who was normally loyal to the government he worked for. Therefore, being Moff of the Chiss Sector posed to him a bit of a challenge. He was no more loyal to the Empire than his father, yet by happenstance—see Jedi

interference—had become one of its 'tyrannical' overseers. He couldn't care less about the Empires' pro-human policies, but at the same time if he didn't support said policies, the Empire would remove him and place an even worse tyrannical overseer in his place.
He was a pilot, not a politician for stars sake. It was bad enough when the Ascendancy had promoted him to Assistant Syndic and forced him to lead battles from the bridge of a Star Destroyer instead of his Clawcraft. But now Jaina and Turi had used their Jedi magic and promoted him from the bridge of a Star Destroyer to an office high-rise lightyears from the nearest conflict.
He had to trade flight-maneuvers for political ones, call-signs for the actual names of the various politicians he would be forced to deal with as Moff. It wasn't like he could refer to the bedraggled Ascendancy senator as 'Scruffy Blue-Face Two' or the Imperial attaché appointed to him as 'Stuffy-Shirt Lead'. It didn't help that he and Jaina were already formulating nicknames for the Imperial Jedi assigned to 'keep him in line'.
At the core of it all though, despite his feelings, he was a soldier loyal to his government. That identity truly was all that he knew since he was born. Trained in sphere of the Empire of the Hand and brought up by Ascendancy rigidity, duty was paramount. Emotions were a hazard, questioning of orders unthinkable, obedience and steadfast adherence to the morals you were raised upon, all cores of who he was.
Even if his heart could care less about the state of the Empire, his mind switched to autopilot and he carried out the duties assigned to him by the Grand Moff with his usual efficiency. He had been Moff for all of a week and already had insurmountable problems to deal with. There was keeping the Chiss, Vagaari, and Imperials happy, there was keeping the hapless civilians caught up in the mess happy, and there was finding time amidst preparing for an invasion of spacebugs to keep his girlfriend happy. A whole lot of happiness to be had, and none of it for him.
"Here's the latest immigration numbers," Force-sensitive-clone-from-an-Empire-of-the-Hand-science-experiment, the dark-haired James Fel handed Jagged a datapad. Apparently, while Jagged had been off camping out on Vagar Praxut, his younger sister had eloped. In typical Wynnsa Fel fashion, she didn't even keep it a secret but had it broadcasted across the HoloNet…the day after the ceremony. And now there was another thing Jagged wasn't keen on, having a brother-in-law. He would have been perfectly happy if Wynnsa remained single for the rest of her very long life.

Jagged took the datapad and looked it over. "So it's true then. The other moffs are shipping their non-human populations into my sectors."
"Looks that way," James said noncommittally. "The Sharb system has received nearly five-thousand non-humans from the Carrion sector within the past two days. You can bet that the local Chiss officials aren't happy."
"They've spent the last couple of centuries pretending that the Chiss was the only sentient and worthwhile lifeform in the galaxy and now get to see over two-dozen species camped out at their doorstep," Assistant Syndic Hess'irolia'nuruodo said dryly. She and Vagaari Empire Supreme Commander Ariarsh were also in the room seated around a hexagonal-shaped table.
Jagged looked at the numbers again, then raised an eyebrow. "It is fortunate that Grand Moff Quille has unintentionally given us a great help."
Irolia frowned. "I'm not following you."
"According to these numbers, since I was elected moff a week ago, nearly a hundred-thousand non-humans have either voluntarily or forcibly relocated to the Chiss sector."
"The Chiss systems were barely holding the current population together. No way they could handle the influx. Especially after the Remnant bombed the heck out of their agricultural worlds," James produced another datapad. "I have a dozen local governors complaining about the situation and risks of starvation if they're forced to care for the non-humans. They want the 'moff' to do something about it."
Jagged nodded. "And I intend to. Get me the heads of the Chiss shipyards, even the new ones we're building. Ariarsh, Irolia, I will need your assistance as well."
"Moff Fel?" Ariarsh spoke up, indicating that Irolia and James weren't the only ones confused by his actions. His Basic was heavily accented, and most of the briefing was being relayed to him by a silver protocol droid behind him.
"Grand Moff Quille has just given me a work-force of nearly a hundred-thousand beings," Jagged folded his hands together. "Some will be up to combat roles, so we can make them pilots or soldiers. With the Killik threat around the corner, we will need every able-bodied individual fighting. Those who aren't predisposed to combat can help out in the factories. Much of the systems may be automated, but we still need people supervising and fine-tuning things."
"The other moffs will never let non-humans join the Imperial Army or Navy."

"And they're not," Jagged answered patiently. He briefly looked to Ariarsh and Irolia. "Let us see if the Vagaari Empire or the CEDF can use auxiliary forces."
"You really like baiting your fellow moffs, don't you," James shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Alright, but it's your funeral."
"Anything else to report?"
"The Chiss still hate the Vagaari and the Vagaari still hate the Chiss. Several instances of bar-fights between their peoples, a training 'mishap' that resulted in the destruction of a Vagaari saucer and Chiss Clawcraft, no lives lost in that instance, and a request by many Chiss and Vagaari to be transferred out of the joint species squads you've instituted."
"You've denied them all, of course."
"Never found pushing a button on a datapad more satisfying," James replied without emotion. "In any case the alliances you're counting on to protect the galaxy are barely sticking together. If the bugs are as Force-aware as you make them out to be, they'd definitely be able to see the shatterpoints in your fleet and exploit them."
"With Jaina and Jedi Knight Altamik currently entertaining the Imperial Jedi, you're my resident Force expert for the time being," Jagged began slowly. "Tell me, James. How would *you* attack the fleet as it is arrayed right now."
James glanced at the holo-emitter and the fleet it was projecting. "That's simple, at these locations. Both the Chiss and Vagaari and Chiss and Imperials will be so caught up in trying to show up the other, they'll get in each other's way. You can combine fleet-groups as much as you want, but the fact that none of your allies trusts the others will get them all killed in the end. But you didn't need a resident Force-expert for that. I never had any official training anyways."
"Supreme Commander," Jagged looked to the Vagaari teen. "Given that information, how do you think our fleets would react to such an attack. Use the holo to simulate such an event."
The protocol droid standing behind Ariarsh relayed the message and the Vagaari leader-in-training glanced at Jagged for a moment, before sending the replica ships to various positions. He then let off an explanation translated by the droid. "Given our people's desire to look after our own selves first, the fleet would fragment into three groups. In the chaos, it is likely friendly-fire would result and this will lead to retaliatory attacks no matter how disciplined we'd like to think our warriors are."
The holo-image of the fleet splintered as a red blob representing the Killiks smashed through them.

"And what would you suggest we do?" Jagged folded his hands in front of him He had his own ideas in mind, but he was very interested to see the young Vagaari's take on the situation.
"Seeing as how it is very doubtful we can get our people to abandon their views in the time we have," Ariarsh studied the image. "We can plan for this to occur and use it to our advantage."
"Agreed," Irolia said slowly, as if she couldn't believe she was agreeing with a member of a race she was sworn to destroy."If we minimize the amount of time our fleets fight as a single group, we can reduce the risk of it fragmenting before we are ready."
"Separate, yet unified," James said sarcastically. "Because that's worked out so well for everyone in the past."
"You have a recommendation?" Jagged raised an eyebrow.
"Put an Imperial command team on the bridge of each of those ships," James answered. "The command team will follow Imperial protocol. Instead of trying to adapt and adopt the standards of the Chiss, Vagaari, Imperial, and who knows who else will help us out here, you'll be uniformed in regulation and situational response. The command teams will force the respective ships to stay in formation and keep the fleet fighting as one group instead of three."
"Then again, neither the Vagaari nor Chiss will tolerate such a group on their vessels," Irolia said tersely.
"The CEDF is all but defunct," James replied turning his gaze to the Chiss military leader and then to Ariarsh. "The Vagaari Empire is putting all its eggs in one basket by helping us out. We don't have time to play the games you soldiers want to play, or tend to the petty hatred you seem to enjoy hanging on to. You're an Imperial Moff now, Jagged. In charge of this sector and the people in it. If you want my advice, stop pandering to their needs and show them you're a leader who won't accept stupidness when this galaxy is on the brink."
"Leader or tyrant?" Jagged said evenly.
"Depends on what the galaxy needs, don't you think? If we had the time, I'd say sure, go ahead and hold hands with the Vagaari and Chiss and Imperials. Start a campfire, sing a couple of songs together, and hope everything becomes all rainbows and sunshine. But we don't have the time, and it'd be foolish to waste what little time we have trying to undo centuries of ingrained behavior. Besides, the more you act like an Imperial Moff, the more leeway Quille will give you to do your own thing in the future."
Jagged stared at the holo-representation of the fleet for a very long moment, his mind taking in the sight of the block of red splintering a once unified block of green, and then proceeding to consume each

section. He steepled his fingers, eventually letting out a soft sigh. "Irolia, Ariarsh, please give me a list of captains and their officers who you believe will not so happily embrace the spirit of cooperation we are trying to foster."
"Sir?" Irolia asked in surprise.
"Mr. Fel is right," Jagged inclined his head towards James. "We cannot waste any more time worrying about whether our allies today will stab us in the back tomorrow. However, considering the Empire despises the Chiss and Vagaari in equal parts due to their non-human status, Imperial command teams will be a detriment rather than an aid. If the latest scouting and sensor reports are correct, we have at most five months before the Killiks arrive. In that time I want a special battalion of soldiers, trained from the non-human refugees, to form auxiliary command crews. Both the Vagaari and Chiss will show these crews how to pilot your ships in addition to usual military training. I want these soldiers capable of taking over a capital ship should the personal feelings of the original command crew get in the way."
"These people, they will not be part of the human Empire?" Ariarsh asked slowly.
"No. As moff I am allowed to raise my own forces, so long as they continue to support the goals of the Empire and do not exceed a certain number."
"Splitting hairs," James said tonelessly.
"I am a moff, I do not split hairs," Jagged raised an eyebrow. "I simply interpret the law to meet this sector's needs. Now if you can please start this project right away. The more comfortable the Vagaari and Chiss crews are with these non-human, alien auxiliaries, the easier any transition will be."
"And what of the years of experience these other captains and crews have?" Irolia argued.
"If those years of experience are negated by their personal grudges, than they are of no use to us in the battlefield," Jagged answered. "Again, these will be auxiliary crews, to be used if personal feelings jeopardize everything we're trying to accomplish. I do not expect them to be used, but at the same time, given the climate, I will not discount their usage either. You have your orders Ariarsh, Irolia. See to it that the proper people are informed."
Both Irolia and Ariarsh left the room with brief nods, clearly not happy, yet understanding his points all the same.
"Anything else, James?"
"Separate of the insurrectionist group out in Kinoss, the governor of the S-K system, Min'gmercil'ess, declared the system its own sovereign

territory and has proclaimed himself emperor. He has the backing of several families that don't acknowledge your authority, and several ships for that matter."
"How many?"
"We have more," James answered dryly. "If you want, we can send in a single fleet group and the whole instance will be over in a flash. But knowing you, you probably want to eschew the heavy-handed 'I am ruler' approach."
"Are they an active threat?"
"Not at the moment, but they can be if they start gaining more support."
"Leave them alone for now then. If we turn our attention onto them, we'll only legitimize their cause."
"As you command. That was the last exciting thing. Everything else is just more procedure and logistics," James produced a half-dozen datapads from the pockets of the flightsuit he was wearing. One by one he tossed them onto the table in front of Jagged. "Chiss worlds are still in need of repair after Imperial bombardment. Request by Chiss Ascendancy Starfighter Productions for more funds. Chiss families vying for the next factory or garrison. Chiss prisoners of war seeking reparations. And that's just these six."
Reaching into another pocket, James pulled out another half-dozen. "Disciplinary hearing against several Imperials who got into a bar-fight with the Chiss. Court-martial of a Chiss who accidently fired his weapon on a Vagaari cruiser during training exercises. Protests by several ranking Imperial officers at letting non-humans aboard their ships. A petition to…"
Jagged held up a hand. "I get the idea."
James shrugged and deposited the second set of datapads, and then pulled out a third. "Most of these ones are supply manifests and status updates ."
"Are you trying to come up with new ways to make me despise you?" Jagged muttered, picking up one of the datapads and scrolling through it.
"Any word from the Galactic Alliance?"
"I contacted Anakin Solo yesterday and informed him of the situation," Jagged answered, placing the datapad in his hand back down. "Even then, we will be hard pressed to safeguard our borders."
"It's not like we have some sort of magic foundry that can churn out ships in the zillions," James agreed.

"Numbers isn't everything," Jagged stood. "We might have several hundred ships, but unless they can fight together they might as well be fleets of two or three."
"Where are you going?"
"I've been neglecting to report to the Imperial Jedi as Moff Quille desired," Jagged answered. He scooped up the pile of datapads and handed them back to James. "As my aide, I deem you more than qualified to deal with these."
"Still sore about me marrying your sister?" James grimaced.
"If there is anything that requires my signature, leave it on my desk and I'll get to it later," Jagged gave James a parting salute and exited the room.
James groaned and let the datapads clatter back onto the table. "I'll get right on it, Moff Fel."
[.:(II):.]
Unlike the other Jedi training facilities scattered throughout the galaxy, the academy for the Imperial Jedi was established on an Imperial Mark II Star Destroyer named the *Rhysode*. Upgraded and pressed into service by Imperial Intelligence for the Chiss-Imperial conflict, the *Rhysode* was far from an ordinary Mark II. Equipped with gravity-well generators and an array of gadgetry that Imperial Intelligence thought they'd need, it was like a floating fortress in itself. Naturally, it was the best place one could raise and train budding Jedi. The fact that it was mobile also added to its perks, enabling the Jedi to arrive in different systems with minimal efforts, and also to flee if under attack.
"*Moff Fel, your shuttle is in our scopes now, transmit clearance code for shield deactivation*," the Imperial control-officer's voice came over the comm in standard Imperial protocol.
"Code for shield deactivation transmitting," Jagged reported, the Imperial Star Destroyer looking like a small blip against the gas giant it was orbiting.
In the Imperial-controlled Ornfra system, the Imperial Jedi were trying to keep a low profile to avoid aggravating the rest of the Chiss populace. Until what was left of the Ascendancy grew used to Imperial law and control, Jagged's policy had been to keep daily life as normal as possible. There were, of course, pockets of Chiss who refused to acknowledge his authority. But the last thing he wanted to do was come down hard and spark a full-fledged rebellion. So long as they had the illusion of free-speech, he'd let them yell as loud as they wanted.
He piloted the shuttle neatly into the hangar bay, having forgone the usual Imperial-assigned pilot for someone of his status. Though the bulky Lambda-class shuttle was a far-cry from the agile *Nssis*-Clawcraft

he was used to, he was at least piloting *something*. It was bad enough that his flight-time barely amounted to five minutes as he directed his shuttle from his flagship a few kilometers away to the Imperial Jedi vessel.
"*You're pouting, aren't you Moff Fel*?" Jaina Solo's voice over the comm-line caused Jagged to smile inwardly.
"I am not, Ambassador Solo," Jagged said with as much dignity as he could. "I scowl and grumble at the present situation, but I do not pout."
"*You could almost outfly me in your Chiss fighter, but now, it's like a pipe-dream*." He could hear the grin in her voice at her continued teasing.
"You are a Jedi, you believe in fair fights," Jagged retorted. The shuttle's landing sequences finished, and he shut the vessel down. "Me in this shuttle is *not* fair."
"*Yup, he's definitely pouting*."
Jagged heard the distinct giggles of kids in the background and had to raise his eyebrows. "Ambassador Solo?"
"*Just letting the younger Imperial Jedi know that you're not the big bad alien-loving tyrant that the Grand Moff told them you were. Just a loyal fighter-jock who pouts whenever you can't fly your little ships.*"
"Appreciated," Jagged said, rolling his eyes. Outside the cockpit window he saw rows of Stormtroopers, black-armored Voidtroopers, TIE pilots, and officers lined up and standing at attention. He spotted the ship's captain and aides waiting for him. With the display of manpower outside, Jagged guessed that the captain of was trying to earn points. Resigning himself to his duty, Jagged grabbed his white moff's cover and tucked it under his arm. He was sure that if the captain had a band on board, they'd be playing some rousing score that emphasized the Imperial-ness of it all.
The ramp of his shuttle lowered with all the usual steam of the heat-vents venting, and he emerged out into the light of the hangar bay. As one, the line of officers, troopers, and pilots pivoted and saluted sharply.
"Moff Fel, it's an honor," the young-looking dark-skinned captain said with Imperial politeness. The man couldn't have been over thirty-five, but the various merits pinned to his uniform suggested his involvement in multiple Outer Rim campaigns.
"Captain Avorn," Jagged said evenly. "You may dispense with the pleasantries. I am sure your people have much better things to do than line up and look pretty."
"Ambassador Solo did warn me you weren't much for pomp and circumstance," the captain chuckled softly. He made a gesture and

those in the hangar began to file out. "Apologies if it bothered you, Moff Fel. But most of the other moffs like such displays, makes them feel important."
Hearing the man's last comment as a sign that he had probably been one of the many 'troublemakers' Grand Moff Quille was shipping to the Chiss Sector, Jagged just nodded. "Is all in order over here?"
"Yes, sir. The Imperial Jedi have settled into the accommodations we've made for them. Their training areas now account for thirty-three percent of this vessel. We're scheduled to have engineers come in tomorrow per Ambassador Solo's instructions to install…meditation chambers I think it was. So long as they do not interfere with the running of this vessel, I let them do whatever they want."
A few corridors and decks later, the captain and Jagged reached a very heavy-looking bulkhead door. "This isn't standard Imperial design."
"The Imperial Jedi portion of this ship is designed to be self-sufficient should the rest of the ship fail," Captain Avorn answered, keying in code and letting the heavy doors rumble open. "The door is capable of sustaining a direct turbolaser hit, or so the designers tell me."
The two stepped into a reappropriated rec-room, where all the Imperial Jedi, their instructors, and Jaina Solo were waiting. Also with them were the Voidtrooper trainees, who stood in formation behind their designated Imperial Jedi.
"Captain Avorn, Moff Fel," Jaina greeted with a smile. At her words, the Imperial Jedi and Voidtrooper trainees snapped off a sharp salute.
"At ease," Jagged said calmly. He mentally evaluated the Imperial Jedi. In addition to the six teens that comprised the Skulls, Crossbones, and Black Hearts, there were twelve others ages ranging from twelve to eight. The youngest looked absolutely adorable in their kid-sized Imperial Jedi outfits, not that he'd ever admit it out loud. The older ones just regarded him with guarded expressions, reflecting a cool exterior that he was all too familiar with. Wynnsa called it his 'Chiss face,' hiding all emotions and projecting loyalty and duty at the same time.
"Thank you, Captain," Jaina inclined her head slightly.
"I'll leave you to it then, Jedi Solo," the Imperial captain saluted one more time then bowed slightly to Jagged. "Moff Fel."
"Dismissed," Jagged confirmed.
The captain left the room, and the heavy doors rumbled close behind him. There was a momentary pause filled with uncertainty as the young Imperial Jedi waited to see what the moff would do next.
Jagged very calmly went up to Antalia and Sivan Draco and, causing some of the others to blink in surprise, knelt in front of the two teens.

"Ranking Imperial Jedi. As per Grand Moff Quille's orders, I am reporting as commanded," Jagged said smoothly. You could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed.
"Ummm…." Antalia bit her lower lip and looked to Turi and Jaina in panic. Both older Jedi were wholly unhelpful in that regard, so the Imperial Jedi fell back on her training. Swallowing, she tried to put on a superior look. "Thank you Moff Fel. Grand Moff Quille will appreciate your report."
"Everything is satisfactory?" Sivan asked, getting into the swing of things.
"Yes, Imperial Jedi Draco," Jagged replied. "The Ascendancy has largely accepted Imperial control, and we are working to replace the vessels lost in the brief war with the Empire. The added ships from the Empire will greatly help the defense of this sector when they arrive."
"Errr…great," Sivan also looked to his instructors, but they kept their faces expressionless. "Oh, you can rise, Moff Fel."
"Thank you." It took Jagged considerable willpower not to smile. Antalia, clearing her throat, quickly came up with another official sounding question. "Is there anything else to report?"
"Nothing that the Grand Moff need concern himself with," Jagged said evenly. "How are your accommodations aboard this vessel?"
Through subtle nudging and shifting, Jagged ended up addressing his question to one of the younger Jedi from the Black Hearts. The Imperial Jedi in question, Sorro Vetter snapped to attention and stepped forward.
"They are adequate, sir."
"But?
"But I miss feeling the warmth of the sun on my skin, the fresh air from a cool breeze, and listening to the local wildlife."
"Understandable," Jagged inclined his head. "I'll see to it that the Imperial Jedi are allocated a planet to train on as well. As the Force was explained to me once, getting attuned with nature is a key aspect of it and I will not allow the Imperial Jedi to be deficient in that aspect."
"Thank you, sir," Sorro Vetter stepped back and rejoined the others.
"Anything else?" Jagged asked, looking to the even younger Imperial Jedi.
"Better food!" One of them spoke out, realizing that the great and scary Moff Fel wasn't so great and scary after all. The one who spoke out was nudged by his peers. "Better food, sir."
"They ran out of the fresh food during the war," Jaina explained. "We've been using military rations since. And being separated from the main fleet-group we don't have access to the resupply ships."

"I'll direct the next resupply ship here then," Jagged promised.
"Thank you, Moff Fel," the younger Imperial Jedi chimed in Force-assisted unison.
"You are welcome," Jagged couldn't help but smile this time. He looked back to Antalia and Sivan. "Do either of you need anything else for your report to the Grand Moff?"
"Umm, I don't think so," Antalia shook her head.
"As long as you're doing Imperial things, he'll be happy," Sivan agreed.
"I appreciate such a vague mandate," Jagged said wryly. He looked to Rahm and Turi. "If you do not mind, I would like to stay aboard and watch the Imperial Jedi train. There is a chance I might have need of one or two of you to settle a…matter of contention in the Kinoss system."
"What's there?" Crossbones Imperial Jedi Drae asked, his voice distorted by the ever-present helmet he had on.
"A group of Chiss who do not acknowledge Imperial rule," Jagged answered. "They have control of five capital ships and a myriad of other vessels. I'd much rather not end the conflict militarily seeing as how those vessels can help us. But we cannot have them active if we are to put our full attention to the matter of the Killiks. The Chiss Jedi Antaria Wellos actually requested Imperial Jedi support."
"Dangerous?" Turi asked with raised eyebrows.
"No shots have been fired yet," Jagged answered. "And ordinarily I'd leave them alone, but the Empire cannot afford to look weak."
"Of course," Turi rolled her eyes in understanding. She patted Rahm's shoulder affectionately. "Ordinarily I'd tag along and see how things work out, but I have to return to Taspir to make sure Quille isn't taking advantage of my absence."
"Which he no doubt is," Rahm said with a knowing nod. "Have fun."
"Thanks," Turi remarked. She tilted her head toward Jagged. "Moff Fel. Good luck with everything."
"Thank you."
The blond-haired Imperial Jedi leader left the room, and the others refocused on each other.
"Okay kiddos," Jaina smiled. "Time to impress the Moff. Show him what you can do."
Jagged took a seat against one of the walls and was treated to a variety of Force-enabled feats, lightsaber duels, and basic combat skills. He had to admit, even if he didn't know much about the Force, the children in the room were very skilled. Then again, they had also had some of the best teachers credits could afford. He had read the report and had been thoroughly stunned as to how much resources

Quille had poured into the kids. From having the renown Tan of the Empire Marek Steele, to Mandalorians, and Force-sensitive masters, the dozen and a half Imperial Jedi probably received more quality training than most soldiers did in several years. And it wasn't just the Imperial Jedi.

The Voidtrooper recruits blended their abilities perfectly with their Force-sensitive leaders, riding on waves of Force energy to launch themselves high in the air. Shooting targets while being floated through a series of obstacles. One Voidtrooper was wearing a special pair of gauntlets—revamped tech from the Reborn era—that appeared to trap the streams of Force-lightning being sent at it. She then used said gauntlets to redirect the lightning around a corner and into a series of training droids. In a show of trust, one of the younger groups had Voidtrooper initiates jumping off a high platform and letting their Force-user levitate them down to the ground.. A member of the Crossbones was defusing a mock-bomb while being suspended upside down by nothing but the Force. Jagged had to admit that Turi and her fellow trainers had truly achieved a remarkable merger of Force-skills and commandos.

And as he watched the Imperial Jedi and their Voidtrooper support meditate, lift engine blocks with their minds, and otherwise do the unthinkable, his gaze kept flickering back to Jaina Solo. She had the largest smile on her face as she coached a couple of nine-year olds through some exercise he had no understanding of. Kneeling between the two pint-sized kids, Jaina's radiant grin and sparkling brown eyes encouraged the two to push back their doubts and achieve something that had only moments earlier seemed impossible.

As if sensing his gaze, Jaina glanced up at him and offered him a playful wink. He could count on one hand the number of times he had seen her so carefree, so full of joy and life. Despite her words, he knew that she had been missing the camaraderie she had had with her fellow Jedi, the ability to talk about Force-related topics and have her audience understand what she was saying. Despite her status as war hero and ambassador, she was, at the heart of it, a Jedi still. Not that that bothered him.

Closing his eyes he focused on a series of thoughts. Though he might not be able to send them, he knew that Jaina would be able to pick them up.

You're a beautiful woman, Jaina Solo.

The slight pinkening of Jaina's cheeks was a sign that the message had been received. Reassuring the two Jedi kids with her, she stood and sauntered over to him.

"You do know that I'm not the only one who can pick up on extra loud thoughts?" Jaina said, her cheeks still pink as she gestured abortively to the others in the room. "You're in a room full of mind-readers."
"My feelings for you are no secret," Jagged answered in turn, gripping one of her hands and tugging her down onto his lap. He then cupped her face with one hand. "Shall I kiss you now just in case some of those present did not pick up on my previous thoughts?"
Jaina's cheeks went from pink to red and Jagged smirked at his victory. She smacked his chest and rolled over so that she was sitting next to him. "Kids present, Moff Fel!"
"You enjoy teaching them."
"Was I that obvious?" Jaina grinned, eagerly looking back at the younger Imperial Jedi. "There's something about those kids. Eager to learn, to please, to grow up and make a difference. They'll go far, if they get the chance."
"The mission I have in mind for them, the risk is minimal," Jagged said, trying to assure Jaina that he wasn't sending the kids into a group of bloodthirsty rebels. "They will have cruiser support should anything go wrong."
"I'm not worried about that," Jaina rested her head on his shoulder. "Not sure if you heard, but the Jedi Council and the rest of the Order isn't looking to favorably on this Imperial Jedi thing. What with the whole 'trained by Inquisitorious members and fallen Jedi'. And the Imperial Jedi barely have the support of the Council of Moffs because of the whole 'Jedi' part of their name and how they're being trained by 'heroes of the Rebellion'. Turi might have thought she was doing these kids a favor, setting up the academy like she did, but long-term, it just isn't sustainable. Sooner or later the Empire is going to ask them to do something that no Jedi would do, and the kids will have to decide whether they're Imperials *or* Jedi."
"I will try and support them as best as I can," Jagged said evenly. "As Moff I am allowed a certain amount of leeway. So long as I am in a position to contribute to their growth and longevity, I will."
Jaina tilted her head back and gave him a gentle kiss. "Thanks, Jag."
"Will they be ready for the fight that is to come?" Jagged asked, gesturing to where a group of Imperial Jedi were playing some type of strategy-precognition holo-game devised by their instructors.
"We have several months to find out," Jaina muttered. "And then all we can do is pray that the Force is with us."
[.:(III):.]
The sojourn onboard the *Rhysode* had been a nice escape from the reality of his duties. Unfortunately, with the Killik invasion only several

months away, Jagged still had much to do. Among them was the arrival of the Imperial reinforcements sent by the Grand Moff.
At the moment, Jagged doubted that anyone onboard his flagship had any good thoughts about the Grand Moff and the political games he was trying to play. When Admiral Vitor Reige showed up with the Imperial reinforcements, more than a few curses were uttered despite the discipline instilled in the Chiss-Imperial bridge crew. Though Vitor had showed up with another thirty capital ships, twenty-five of those capital ships were *Victory*-class Star Destroyers or older model cruisers. The remaining five were Imperial mark I Star Destroyers, with all five ships missing gun turrets or sections of armored plating. According to the Admiral Reige's explanation, Grand Moff Quille essentially packed up any and all officers and personnel who disagreed with his policies and shipped them off to the Chiss Sector. A second fleet group was massing at the Chiss-Imperial border supposedly as a second line of defense, but anyone with half a brain cell knew better.
With Admiral Reige's arrival, however, Jagged was able to hand over control of the fleet to the Imperial officer. Only ten years old than Jagged, Admiral Reige had a lengthy resume that included flying a shuttle through multiple combat situations in the Yuuzhan Vong War, defense of the Imperial Embassy during the Tion Hegemony Civil War, and single-handedly bringing down a network of pirate groups with minimal staffing and resources.
And since they had to make sure they used all their resources as efficiently as possible, he seemed like just the man for the job.
Integrating the new Imperial forces was relatively easy considering protocol and fleet maneuvers were very similar to CEDF procedures. The hard part, however, was the upkeep to these new additions to the fleet. Apparently Grand Moff Quille had raided as many moth-balled and museum-piece ships he could get his hands on and put the barest of efforts into seeing that they were ready for the mission they were being sent on. Quille had also sent them on their way with just enough supplies to reach Chiss space. Half of Vitor's fleet wasn't combat ready, and the half that was would have been shredded in any modern ship-to-ship fight. In addition to many of the pieces of tech on the older cruisers no longer being made, newer tech couldn't even be used as a replacement because the wiring and other systems wouldn't be able to handle it. The engineers and techs were working overtime overhauling the ships, but their latest prognosis wasn't as optimistic as Jagged preferred.
"Let's hope our other allies bring ships in better condition," James said, walking in stride with Jagged inside the hull of a *Victory II*-class Star

Destroyer being retrofitted with Chiss Maser cannons. The smell of solder and arc-welders was predominant as blue and white flares of light lit up all over the ship. The crew onboard had been fortunate as the *Arkanian Dragon* had suffered a large, very dangerous reactor leak mid-journey and had barely made the final jump. The fifty-year old ship was still operational, however, and the techs were trying to ensure it lasted the coming battle. "All this repair and retrofitting is setting us back at least a month or two and costing us resources we could be using making newer, better ships."
"We'd still need crews for those ships," Jagged said, signing off on one datapad after another in a constant exchange with his brother-in-law. "Not to mention any ships fresh off the factory is bound to have defects and we don't have time for dozens of shake-down runs."
"Better the leaky reactor we know than the one we don't, huh," James shook his head, stepping onto a lift platform with the moff. "You're the boss. At least we know these shipyards are up to servicing Star Destroyer-sized ships. It'll be competing with the Copero shipyards in no time. Nice of you to give the Kthira family a boost."
Jagged let out a breath that immediately crystallized in the icy air of the snow-covered planet of Rhigar. "I want it known that loyalty is rewarded. Ashik took a great risk backing me when the Ascendancy was still on the fence about a great many things. Even helped me navigate the complicated political system when I first became Assistant Syndic. This is the least I could do."
"It's a good thing his family can handle the work-load," James tightened a scarf around his face. "It would have blown up in your face if they couldn't."
"I've learned, James, that the fate of the galaxy can be a strong motivator. Many people have risen to the challenges they are given, and those that aren't are helped along. This is *my* sector, and I will do what's best for my people."
"You sure we're in the same Empire?"
"Given the amount of non-humans we're now looking after, I highly doubt it," Jagged answered. His white cape fluttered in the arctic breeze, the gold tassels on his shoulders flapping up and down. All around them ships were either being built or repaired, droids flitted from task to task, the sound of construction coming clear across the frozen tundra. "How goes the recruitment drive?"
"Do you really want to know?"
"I asked."
"They're practically leaping at the opportunity. Three hundred have signed up on the first day alone. Only problem we're having is that all

our uniforms and weapons are designed for Chiss or humans. Try imagining a Gran cramming his head into a stormtrooper helmet, or a Talz squeezing our standard-issue blaster pistols."
"Gran and Talz?"
"Just examples. We have a bunch of Twi'leks from Bisellia, a clan of Trandoshans out of the Jaemus system, even got a couple of Bith volunteers. Stormtrooper helmets aren't really designed for any of them."
"Forget the helmets," Jagged said. "Not like they'll need them anyways."
"Sure."
"Why did you seem reluctant to share this news?"
"Well, you're popular with the non-humans for giving them a chance to actually fight for a change."
"But?"
"Not so much with the nearly hundred Imperial warships sitting in and around Chiss space," James replied. "Arming aliens, training them to seize control of Star Destroyers and other capital ships, it's almost like you're raising your own private army."
"In a way, I am."
"Hence your nickname."
"Nickname?"
"Any Imp with a xenophobic bone in their body is calling you Emperor Fel, Lord of the Aliens."
"That it?"
"Well, a few other names too, most of them relating to your mental capacity or your deviant sexual preferences."
Jagged kept his face impassive. Try to placate the Chiss, Vagaari, and non-human refugees, and he alienates the human-first Imperials that formed the backbone of his sector's defense. Try to placate the xenophobic powerbase of the Empire, and he ends up alienating the non-humans who's wellbeing was supposed to be his concern. Why couldn't he have a problem where all that was required was to hit it with a torpedo from his starfighter?
"Run with that."
"With what? Your diminished mental capacity or your deviant sexual preferences?"
"You're fast becoming my least favorite brother-in-law. The Emperor Fel comment."
"Are you sure that's a good thing? Grand Moff Quille is already plotting to kill you the minute it suits him."

"I don't mean to declare me emperor or some foolish idea like that," Jagged walked along the metal walkway to another hangar. "The 'us' versus 'them' mentality developing among the human and aliens serving in this sector is another divide we don't need. The Chiss Sector is a part of the Empire now, regardless of who is living in it. This is a time the Empire's propaganda machine will come in handy. Right now our forces are demoralized, divided, and stuck on the small picture. What we have to do is pop their bubble and make them *see* what's at stake."
"It shouldn't be a problem. My wife knows a lot of people in the film industry, we can have a couple of patriotic vids out in no time."
"More than that." Jagged directed evenly, ignoring the fact that James' wife was Wyn. It was better for his sanity that way. "Have the propaganda machine interview common soldiers, refugees, civilians. Have them take vids of the planets we live on, the families we live with. Put faces to names, definitions to words, reasons to a cause. Gloss over nothing. When done, flood the HoloNet with these vids. This sector is ours, and it will be ours to lose if we can't get things together."
"Understood."
Jagged watched as a squadron of fighters came off the assembly-lines and were brought out into a transport ship.
"What's on your mind?"
"The Killiks have a dozen and a half hyperspace lanes they could use to enter this galaxy. They're coming from the Unknown Regions, so they might even discover a few we don't know about. We can in no way divide our forces that many times and hope to hold an assault by the full strength of their force."
"True," James allowed.
"I will have to talk with Admiral Reige, Ariarsh, and Irolia."
"Coming up with something sneaky?"
Jagged nodded once. "As Jaina Solo likes to remind me, I am part Fel and part Antilles, apparently sneaky is in my blood."
[.:(IV):.]
There was the very public role of moff, the official role of moff, and the side of a moff that was kept hidden from most. Now in charge of over thirty-three systems and their inhabitants, it was his job to know about problems before they arose, to undermine threats before they undermined him. Having inherited the Chiss Intelligence apparatus, as well as given access to Imperial Intelligence resources,. Jagged had a great deal of information at his disposal. Though he could definitely do without the cloak-and-dagger routines, the intel networks had helped

to stop a sabotage of one of the newer shipyards, an attempted assassination on a local Imperial official, and much more.
Busy as he was with his other duties, Jagged could scarcely take the time to review and react to every single threat. That was why the man he appointed as his new head of intelligence was someone who technically didn't exist.
"Director Cem Fel," Jagged acknowledged his shadow-sibling in the closed off room of the Nuruodo estate. Who better to run the Intelligence networks than someone who supposedly never existed.
"Moff Jagged Fel," Cem returned with a small smile. "You've been busy these past few days."
"You would know."
"Can't blame me for keeping tabs on my last surviving brother now, can you?"
"You wanted to meet me?"
Cem's expression became serious and he turned on several computer monitors. "Normally I'd handle these things myself, but I thought you'd probably want to know."
Jagged looked at the information scrolling across the screen, then frowned. "Are you certain?"
"Double and triple checked. It was like a perfect storm of events. With the war, the plant-blight on Jamiron, the drought on Ool, and the damage to Cioral from the Base Delta Zero, the Chiss Sector has just enough food stores to last until the end of the year. And that's under heavy rationing and discounting the refugees coming in from the rest of the Empire. If you want to add the hundreds of thousands of extra mouths, optimistically, we have at most two months, maybe a little more, of food left for the entire sector. Cioral hadn't yet begun their harvest when it was hit, Ool had half theirs die on them from the lack of water, and Jamiron had to scrap their crop from the plant-blight. The next harvests are still three to four months away and existing stockpiles were depleted because the various families raided them when the Empire started their march into Chiss space."
"What were you intending to do?"
"Go on my hands and knees to the Grand Moff and beg him to send food convoys over," Cem said sarcastically. "No, I was planning on negotiating with several Galactic Alliance governments for the deficit. Only problem, is that as part of the Empire, any treaty of that magnitude needs the Council of Moff's approval. We put that word out and you'll be like a bleeding fish surrounded by firaxan. We try to do this on the sly, and you can bet the normal costs will skyrocket. That's credits you can use to build up this sector's defenses. Of course, if we

do it on the sly and word gets out anyways, you'll also be stripped of your position the moment this conflict is over."
Jagged rubbed at his face tiredly, exhaling and reviewing the number again. He then nodded and looked away. "I think I can do something about this."
"That's good, because I was running out of ideas. What's your secret?"
"Anakin Solo has the Galactic Alliance wrapped around his finger, Jacen Solo is very close friends with the regent of sixty-three systems. Both have sent word that they are coming with a fleet. Now, if those fleets happen to be loaded down with many tons of extra food-goods, we're not breaking any Imperial regulations, are we?"
"Not if they were good-will donations," Cem smiled grimly. "But even then, we can't keep a lid on this much longer. Those in charge of the food sector have already run the numbers. Sooner, rather than later, people are going to learn of the food shortages, and that will put a strain on the goods already available."
"Sometimes Imperial tactics work the best," Jagged said slowly. "Put garrisons around all our food-production facilities. For those aware of the situation, impress on them the importance of keeping it quiet. If they become disgruntled or refuse to obey, however, place them under house arrest."
"Jaina probably wouldn't approve, brother."
"She'll understand," Jagged said. "If the Imperial Jedi were fully trained and older, I might have risked it and used them to mitigate the circumstances, but they aren't. Any disruption at this point will only hurt the efforts to defend this territory."
"And who do you want to make the warnings, Chiss, Imperial, Vagaari?"
"The food industry is still under Chiss control is it not?"
"Yes."
"Then work with the Inrokini family and do it quietly."
"Discretion is part of our trade, Moff Fel. I won't let you down."
Jagged looked over the numbers again and shook his head slowly. "By the time this Killik business is over, I'm either going to be the shortest-reigning moff ever, or dead."
"Think of it this way," Cem chuckled. "If you survive this and stay in power, you'll have all sorts of Imperial reforms and regulations to look forward to."
"I was trying *not* to think of it that way," Jagged grumbled.
"Well, you have to look forward to something."
"Who says I'm not."

"What…oh, right. The Empire is part of the Galactic Alliance, and the Ascendancy is now a part of the Empire. No more conflict of interest," Cem's quick deduction showed that Jagged and Wynssa weren't the only Fels with sharp minds. "Definitely a good reason to survive then, she'd make a good Fel. Have everything planned then?"
"No," Jagged said mildly. "She's a mind-reader, remember. It makes surprising her…difficult."
"Oh, okay. Blink once if you want me to set something up without your knowledge, twice if you want me to get our little sister involved."
Jagged eyed his brother dourly. "I am perfectly capable of coming up with the right moment without your help, Cem."
"I don't know. We Fels are hardly the most romantic. I mean, mom practically had to propose to dad. Wynssa got married on a movie sound stage. You and Jaina decided that duty was more important than your feelings and carried on with the most obvious hidden relationship ever. Need I go on?
"Aren't you supposed to be spending your time making sure you have the intel needed to keep this sector from collapsing?" Jagged asked.
"Everyone needs a hobby."
"Cem."
"Hey, all I have to do is mention this to our little sister and she'll go ahead and do things even if you say no."
"I made you Head of Intelligence, what more do you want?" Jagged grumbled. "And for future reference, blackmailing me with our sister is not appreciated."
Cem smirked and gestured to the door. "Go on, Moff Fel. Your adoring public awaits. In the meantime I'll see what I can do about getting extra foodstuffs without too much risk."
"You don't have many options."
"The Vagaari," Cem said, eyes gleaming.
Jagged hung his head. "If you make the Chiss any more in debt to the Vagaari, they're liable to take their own lives. They're already incensed about the Vagaari defending Csilla."
"I'm sure most of them would rather not starve now that they see how idiotic they've been," Cem replied. "The Vagaari are closer at the moment, so can provide more immediate relief. Plus, more aid will make the Chiss think twice about attacking the Vagaari in the near future."
"I'll go talk with Elansh then," Jagged said slowly. "An official request from me will look better than a hidden request from a shadow."
"Just giving you options, Moff Fel."
Jagged nodded. "Thank you, Cem."

"Not a problem. This is kind of fun, isn't it?"
"You take after mother and Wyn a bit too much," Jagged deadpanned. He let the turbolift door slide open. "Keep in touch if anything else develops."
"You can count on it, Jagged."
[.:(V):.]
With so many things going on, it was sometimes easy to forget that he had ascended to his position quite literally at gunpoint only a week and a half earlier. After all, what was the Ascendancy supposed to do when you parked two hostile fleets above their capital planet and held a third of their population hostage. Though most of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force was loyal to him and Irolia, there were isolated divisions and wings that were not. And certainly not all of the individual House and Colonial Phalanxes accepted the sudden Imperial status quo. Making the situation even trickier was the number of every-day Chiss dissatisfied with the turn of events.
Though he had yet to begin applying Imperial laws and taxes to his sector, the arrival of Admiral Reige's fleet had produced something of a panic for the Chiss resistance. As if his arrival had just confirmed that the Ascendancy was finally done for and that Chiss space was now Imperial territory.
Of course, some part of Jagged's mind was aware of all this as he tried to keep the balance between the major powers vying for prominence. But such thoughts normally took a back seat in the light of the eminent Killik invasion and his not-so-ready defenses. If the Killiks arrived any earlier than they were expected, the Chiss sector, and maybe the galaxy, was in royal trouble. It was hard to fathom a bug-fleet of over a thousand ships bearing down on the galaxy from some dark unknown. Harder still was the idea that such a bug-fleet had the ability to bring the galaxy to its knees in a way the Yuuzhan Vong never could.
At least the Yuuzhan Vong were interested in holding territory, in maintaining some form of stability in the areas they conquered. The Killiks couldn't care less if the galaxy went to Kessel in a handbasket. Didn't care if whole planets were razed in their misguided quest to 'save' the galaxy.
It was probably this inconceivable idea of a bug-invasion, an un-confirmable fact derived from some mystical Jedi magic used by an infamous Solo, that kept Grand Moff Quille and most of the Ascendancy from truly believing that there was any threat.
As Jagged climbed into his chauffeured speeder in preparation for his trip to the spaceport, he once again reviewed yet another set of datapads. It wasn't long before all the facts began to blur, however.

Feeling the exhaustion of jetting around to one part of the Chiss sector to another, Jagged set the datapad back down and rubbed at his eyes. He then chose that moment to gaze out the speeder window at the passing cityscape. It was probably that fortuitous choice that saved his life.

Stopped in traffic for a moment, he looked at the rooftops of a series of buildings and saw a flash of light. Having flown a starfighter long enough, Jagged recognized the flare of a missile leaving its tube. He shoved the door to his speeder open and threw himself out the side. A split second later, the missile homed in on the speeder's heat signature, the forward engine compartment, and reduced it to a flaming wreck.

Ears still ringing from the detonation, Jagged was slightly dazed as he watched a second missile slam into the security speeder behind his own. The second explosion threw him back to the ground, shrapnel whizzing over him as the mangled speeder disintegrated from the military-grade ordinance.

By the time the ringing subsided, Jagged heard a fanatical yell fill the air. "For the Empire! Kill the pretender!"

The few members of his security team still alive were besieged by a volley of grenades lobbed in their direction. Maser and blaster fire followed. The figure on the rooftop fired off another missile, and the security skyskimmer that had responded to the attack was blown out of the air.

Jagged saw an assault rifle in the hands on one of his dead guards and promptly grabbed it. Taking cover behind the burning wreck of his speeder, he promptly began firing at the assailants. All were masked, covered in armor from head to toe. And as he winged his first target, he quickly discovered that all were wearing suicide belts as well. He took out two more before the incoming fire intensified on his location. He looked around, and quickly realized that he was the only one left, all his guards dead. Willing to give anything for his Clawcraft, Jagged dove into a nearby alleyway amid a hail of blasterfire. Another moment later, the rooftop-missile-launching-assassin blasted his dead speeder deeper into speeder-afterlife.

"Cronal is god!" A voice screamed from behind him.

Jagged whirled around, only to be shoulder-tackled into the wall behind him by a hulking figure, his gun flying out of his hand on impact. Feeling his ribs protest, Jagged hammer-fisted the man's back. It only succeeded in enraging his attacker, who lifted him up in a crushing bearhug. His attacker was like the others, wearing a helmet and complete armored, making physically attacking him very hard.

As Jagged began to see stars from the crushing pressure, a red lightsaber flew out of the alleyway and promptly decapitated the man.
"Moff Fel, are you okay?" Sivan Draco emerged from the shadows like a wraith.
"I'll live," Jagged breathed, clutching his bruised chest. "There are more of them."
Sivan's eyes darted back towards the main street. "Yeah, at least seven others."
Another missile snaked its way from the rooftops. This time, however, Jagged had a Jedi bodyguard at his side. Sivan held out a hand, and the missile flipped end over end before flying back the way it came. The rooftop assassin had no time to get out of the way as he was obliterated by his own projectile.
"What are you doing here?" Jagged muttered, accepting the blaster pistol Sivan handed to him.
The olive-skinned human teen continued to scan the entrance to the alley. "Jedi Knight Solo, sir. She said that the Imperial Jedi would be able to send a more detailed report to the Grand Moff if we were to shadow you. I arrived on Shihon yesterday."
"And the unofficial version of those orders?"
"Jedi Knight Solo had a premonition after you left the *Rhysode*, sir," Sivan answered. "While Antalia handles that diplomatic dispute with Kinoss, I was ordered to step in if your security detail failed."
"Remind me to thank her later," Jagged said, firing a shot that hit an assailant peaking out a high-rise window. The assailant staggered and fell out the window, falling several stories to the ground below.
"For the Emperor!" Another assassin screamed, leaping down from a fire-escape above them.
Sivan just rolled his eyes. Without even looking, he held out a hand and suspended the attacker in mid-air. "For future reference, scream that *after* you kill your target. Do you want to try again?"
The assassin flailed about in the Force grip.
"Here," Sivan made a gesture and the assailant was thrown back to the top of the fire-escape. Rather than try again, though, the assailant scampered away. With the revelation of a Jedi protecting the moff, the rest of the assassins seemed to have had enough and disappeared back into the nooks they had come from.
"They escaped," Jagged said mildly.
Sivan held up a finger where a fresh cut oozed blood. "Blood trail. We can track him down later."
"That doesn't sound too Jedi-like."

"Learned it from an Inquisitorious, really handy for investigations," Sivan shrugged, as if it was no big deal.
"Indeed," Jagged agreed. "Thank you for your assistance."
"My life for the Empire," Sivan said dutifully.
At that, Jagged recalled the words his assassins had been yelling out. "Hopefully a different empire than the one they believe in. Were you able to get anything from their minds?"
"Force doesn't work like that," Sivan shook his head, clipping his lightsaber back to his belt. "And my sister's better gifted than I at the mind-reading stuff. I'm more a throw-people-around and psychometry person."
"I'll take your word for it," Jagged could feel his adrenaline recede and the realization that he had just survived an assassination attempt began to sink in. He could also feel the sting of several gashes caused by the flying shrapnel, and unconsciously raised a hand to his cheek. It came away red. Glancing down at his once white uniform, it was stained red in several locations. "Guess I wasn't as lucky as I thought I was."
"We can get those looked at once we're on my ship, sir. Let's get you out of here," Sivan said, gently gripping his arm and leading him out of the alley. In the distance they could hear the whirling alarms of additional security forces en route.
"You have a ship?"
"Of course," Sivan chuckled. "Master Marek gave it to me when I got the assignment. He and Master Altamik got Sienar to create a unique line just for us Imperial Jedi."
"Make sense."
"Here we go, Moff Fel," Sivan took Jagged to his own speeder, a sleek black vehicle that looked as if it was built for speed. The young Imperial Jedi opened one side and helped him in. "That group may have withdrawn, but you do know you aren't the most popular person on Shihon?"
"One of the reasons why I am here," Jagged replied with a curt nod. "I was trying to re-establish ties to the families in this system. When the Sabosen family lost its power, many families that relied on it did so also."
"All we have to do is figure out who hired the assassins. Was it home-grown Shihon Chiss? Insurrectionist Chiss from outside? Or Grand Moff Quille's flunkies acting 'without his orders'."
"Another thing to think about," Jagged groaned.
Sivan shook his head. "You let me handle that, Moff Fel."

Jagged regarded the younger man with a raised eyebrow."Would this not be your first independent mission?"
Sivan nodded. "What better way to start than trying to find the guys that just tried to kill my boss?"
"I'll put you in touch with the Imperial Intelligence network," Jagged said slowly. He knew that Jaina wouldn't have let Sivan fly solo if she didn't think he was ready. "Watch your back."
"Don't worry, sir," Sivan said. "You might not have seen them, but I have half of Skull squadron out here too."
"Your sister has the other half?"
"Yes, sir."
Jagged once again admired the various differences between these Imperial Jedi and the Order Jaina had come from. At least the Imperial Jedi were under no illusions as to what their role in the Empire was.
"Very well, carry out your investigation and be sure to report any findings to me."
"And the assassins, sir?"
"Arrest them if possible, but don't risk your lives to do so. If they're hired guns, they won't be able to tell us much. If they're fanatics, they probably won't let themselves be taken alive anyways."
"Yes, sir."
Jagged saw the spaceport approach, and sagged back in the seat of the speeder, his mind once again overloaded with things he had to do. Chief among them was to thank Jaina for once again saving his life.
[.:(VI):.]
"How long have I been asleep?" Jagged murmured, feeling his girlfriend's lips slowly leave his. He kept his own eyes close, knowing from the feel of the sheets beneath him that he was in the bed he had commissioned for her on the *Eternal Dyanst*.
"Don't worry about that, Jag," Jaina's voice answered tenderly. The bed shifted and he felt her slide in next to him. She rested her head on his shoulder, a hand laying on his bare chest. "We've got things under control."
He opened his eyes and met her soft gaze. "Didn't feel like things were too under control before I went to sleep."
"I got the Imperial Jedi fully involved in things," she murmured. "Your brother told me about the food problems, so I assigned Rahm Marek's group to keep the peace on the more restive worlds. Alexander Astin and his brood are currently negotiating with several recently-joined Imperial worlds for temporary relief. Antalia Draco successfully talked the Chiss separatists on Kinoss into rejoining the rest of the Empire, and her brother is making headway into his own investigations. Even

the little ones are helping out, working with their mentors and using their abilities to keep the cross-species tension down."
"Makes me wonder why I didn't ask for your help in the first place," Jagged laughed bitterly. His torso was still covered in bacta patches.
"You didn't want to treat the Imperial Jedi like the Galactic Alliance treats the Order," Jaina murmured. Her hand rested over one of the bacta patches, and her eyes fluttered close. "Didn't want the young ones to feel the weight of the galaxy on their shoulder just yet."
"Jedi are more than just tools of a government. They are living beings too. I should know better than anyone, I'm dating one," Jagged said softly, a hand covering one of hers. He felt a warmth build where her hand rested, and the dull ache of the shrapnel would vanish. He very slowly removed the bacta patch and revealed an expanse of unblemished skin. She crept up his body and gave him a gentle kiss on his lips.
"And for that, I love you, Jagged," Jaina brushed his check. "But kids or not, we're Jedi. Today, tomorrow, we'll still be Jedi. And if we can solve the problems now, we won't have to worry about tomorrow."
Jagged breathed out slowly. "I would never ask or make it an order of the Imperial Jedi."
"I know. We know. That's why all of the Imperial Jedi are helping out," Jaina said. "I hope you don't mind but I shared with the Imperial Jedi some stories about what makes you *you.* How you'll never compromise your morals, but at the same time always doing what must be done to finish the job. How you'll fight to the very edge of life for those you care for, and hunt down to the edge of the galaxy those who stand in your way. You're logical, practical, but never predictable. You're a paragon for what the Empire is supposed to stand for, yet a foil for what it has become. If I didn't think you could hold this sector together, I never would have gone along with Turi's plan. But you can and are, despite the odds stacked against you, against us."
"I cannot let this sector become reliant on the Imperial Jedi to solve their problems," Jagged glanced down at his lover. "We would fall into the same trap the rest of the galaxy has with the greater Jedi Order. I will attempt to replace them with a more permanent solution as soon as one comes available."
"Then, Moff Fel," Jaina kissed him again. "I would suggest you also start thinking of a clear role for *your* Imperial Jedi."
"They serve the Empire."
"As Turi explained it to me, they serve the principles the Empire was founded on," Jaina corrected with a twinkle in her eyes. "Why do you think she had them posted out here? The less intertwined they are with

the moffs' schemes, the less likely they'll be forced into those political games the moffs play."
Jagged rolled his eyes. "So instead of playing the moffs' games, they're playing hers?"
"It's not so bad," Jaina shrugged. "They have you protecting them, and in turn they'll protect you. So long as they *appear* good little Imperial Jedi, Grand Moff Quille couldn't care less. Out of sight, out of mind."
Jagged shifted, pulling her closer. "You Jedi are far too devious for your own good."
Jaina placed both her hands on his bare chest. "Is that a compliment, Moff Fel?"
"Deviousness is good," Jagged growled, rolling on top of her and pinning her to the bed with his weight. "So long as it doesn't come back to…bite you."
Thoughts of duty and the state of his sector flew out of his mind, as they usually did when Jaina Solo was involved. Focusing solely on making love to the only person capable of slipping through his heavily-shielded heart, Jagged let Jaina's intoxicating scent wash away all other concerns.
His comlink pinged. He drew the blaster from the nightstand and reduced the comlink to electronic scrap, all without breaking a passionate kiss.
The problems in the system, the sector, and the galaxy could wait for a moment, he had someone much more important to tend to.
[.:(Chapter End):.]

Anakin
[.:(I):.]
There is a difference in being a symbol and believing you were that symbol, Anakin Solo knew that. Some symbols were needed regardless of what was happening all over the galaxy. People—humans and most non-humans—all needed someone or something to believe in, to look to in hard times. It was a psychological need, an escape, the hope that that symbol would get them through the darkest of days. It was fine if the symbol was an inanimate object, or a non-corporeal deity. Not so much if that symbol was a living being who knew what would happen if that belief was shattered. Especially so if that living being tried to live up to everything that symbol entailed to hold together a government on life-support.
Again, a threat had been avoided thanks to Anakin Solo's brilliance. Again he had saved the galaxy from chaos, pulled it back from the brink. The media channels were flooded with one story after another

about Anakin's past, about how he 'single-handedly' set in motion the events that ended the Vong War. How he once again swooped in to save the galaxy in need of direction. Again he was the hero that everyone needed, the one who slew the 'deranged' and twisted evil creature that was Raynar Thul. With Raynar dead, the Killiks had withdrawn from most contested worlds or simply disappeared all together; including from Denon. In the minds of most everyone, the battle against the evil space bugs was over and now it was time to rebuild.

Never mind that hundreds had died in the operation on Denon fighting against the numerically superior Killik forces. Among the number were seven apprentices and five Knights, none older than twenty. Over a dozen other Jedi who had taken part in the Denon operations were also in bacta tanks or traumatized by what they had seen. Bodies half-eaten, their friends cut down by giant bugs, piles of organic sludge that used to be living being, and many more terrors that made even veterans of the Yuuzhan Vong War ill.

There was no mention of the thousands of others across the galaxy who fell in the fighting, or the systems that still remained in Killik hands after failed offensives. It didn't matter that the Galactic Alliance security forces found only a fraction of the explosives the Killiks had planted, or that millions across the galaxy still remained 'Joined,' that governments across the galaxy remained compromised or weakened thanks to the Killiks' ability to sow chaos.

No. To the rest of the galaxy, it was a crisis ended all thanks to the efforts of the Jedi and Anakin Solo—who was once again being called the next leader of the Jedi Order. The people were rallying around Anakin Solo like never before, even if his contributions had been the same or less than some of the others who had fought.

The media was making it clear, the galaxy had been in turmoil. He returns, and in half a year, the galaxy begins to make sense again.

It was nearly a given, though the elections were still months away, that Kenth Hamner would win the position of Chief of State. Already the pundits were predicted what type of leader he would be and were happily touting the benefits to having a Jedi in charge of the government. 'Uncorruptable,' 'wise,' 'fair,' were just some of the words being bandied about.

It was also a given, that seeing as how the Killiks had built up a massive force on the capital planet, that better security was needed. In his last few months of office, mostly due to the external pressures, Cal Omas was instituting the creation of the Galactic Alliance Guard. They would be the Chief of State's personal combat and intelligence unit.

Capable of being sent out when red-tape would bog down any other force and armed with a vast array of senatorial given powers, the Galactic Alliance Guard, or GAG as it was already being called on the HoloNet, would be the first and last line of defense for the capital planet.
And who would be its leader?
"This…it's a great honor, Chief of State," Anakin said, keeping his face as congenial as he could. He folded his arms in front of himself and sat back in the comfy chair he was in "But I'm sure you can find someone with more experience."
"Anakin, my boy," Cal Omas laughed softly. "When you were just a kid you brought down the Black Sun network. As a teen you led a rag-tag force and retook Hutt Space, brought the Jedi into the war and changed the course of history. You've lead suicide missions and returned whole, out-thought many more 'experienced' people than you. Please, we need you to accept. The *galaxy* needs you to accept. They need the reassurance that someone just as uncorruptable as Kenth Hamner will be in charge of what will essentially by a secret police force."
"That's part of the problem. Neither Kenth or myself is uncorruptable, regardless of how we'd like to think so. The prospect of abuse of the *secret* police force…"
"A secret police force whose officers will be hand-picked by you and you alone. Of course they will have to be approved by the senate, but it will be your choices that go before the governing body and not someone else's. On the fly, you led a fleet made up of disparate groups to liberate entire sectors. This will be your own force you can use to help make this single planet a better and safer place. An entire fleet to help you solve problems caused by all our political bickering. If not you, Anakin Solo, Hero of the Jedi Order, then who else would you trust in such a position?"
"Even then, I'd still have to talk to my family about it." Anakin replied, briefly glancing out the window at the rising sun. It was strange, he had been up for two days straight, but didn't have the time to let him feel exhausted. "We have a home, a place on Zonama."
"And if things go wrong in this galaxy again, you'll once again have to come out here anyways," Cal Omas said bluntly. "Face it, Anakin. The galaxy needs you."
"The galaxy *thinks* it needs me. I'm just one person."
"You're more than that, and you know that. Heck, even the Jedi in your own order worship you."

"I'd love for Master Horn and Kam Solusar to be here to hear that," Anakin said flatly. "Listen, you can't built up the next government around one person. The last time the galaxy did that, Palpatine became Sith Lord."
"But *you* won't. Think about it, talk it over with that wife of yours. I'm sure that after three days of press-conferences, senatorial hearings, and media-circuits you need a break. Go see her."
"If I could I'd be with her instead of in this meeting," Anakin said with a wry, tired grin. "But she has galactic problems of her own. The first elements of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet arrived in the Outer Rim two days ago and she headed off to…well…head them off."
"I read the report about the Vong," Cal's expression looked drawn as he ran a hand over his face. "Do you truly think you can keep the Yuuzhan Vong from attacking Bothawuii? Despite not being Galactic Alliance members any more, they still help their neighboring systems. Any disruption of that aid will have serious repercussions."
"Can't promise anything," Anakin shook his head. "Despite the media reports, I can't perform miracles on a whim. If I could, Raynar would still be alive."
"You did what you had to do."
"That's what I tell myself," Anakin said distantly. "Anyways. Until I talk it over with Tahiri and the rest of my family, I can't say one way or the other about accepting the post. Head of the Galactic Alliance Guard is a big step from being a regular Jedi."
"Forgive me for saying this, but you were never a regular Jedi."
"Whenever I get into situations like this, I also tell myself that," Anakin said dryly, standing. "Chief of State."
"Omas is just fine too, Jedi Solo."
"Busy day," Anakin smiled faintly. "After this I think I have to go before the Armed Forces Committee to give them a rundown of what resources the Galactic Alliance has left."
"With the defeat of the Killiks, we should be able to breathe easier."
"One victory," Anakin held up a single finger. "It was one victory, Chief of State. There's still millions of Killiks out there, biding their time. After all, until Raynar's death, the Killiks were fighting for over four dozen systems. We may have taken most of those systems back, but that was only because the Killiks suddenly abandoned them. They went somewhere, and until we know where, they might just pop up again in the near future."
Cal Omas nodded wearily. "Understandable. Well, I wish you luck. In the meantime I'll do what I can to prepare this chair for Kenth. With the

senate in disarray and the galaxy in shambles, he's going to need every advantage I can give him."
"He hasn't won yet."
Cal shook his head wryly. "You don't need to be a Jedi to see the outcome of the elections. Get going to your meeting, and let me know as soon as you've made your decision."
"Will do." Anakin left the office, the door sliding shut behind him.
[.:(II):.]
The doors to the Galactic Alliance Strategic Command situation room opened with a soundless rush of air. Several people inside the room looked up and nodded at Anakin in acknowledgement as he entered the room. The incessant chatter of reports pouring in from across the galaxy mingled with various electronic beeps and chirps from the many droids in the room. The shift on duty was different from the one Anakin had checked in with the previous night, once again reminding Anakin that a break was needed in his near future.
Without the demand of family, it was hard for Anakin to separate the monumental task he had before him and his own well-being. Both Jayce and Cassa were currently with their grandparents—see free babysitters—and hanging out with Force-sensitive children their age. His wife should be with the Yuuzhan Vong fleet at the edge of the galaxy…and Anakin tilted his head in mild puzzlement as he sensed she was a lot closer to Denon than she should have been. He felt her brief, tired greeting, and mentally began going over the many possibilities her early return signified.
None of them were necessarily good.
One scenario, she managed to convince the Yuuzhan Vong commander to stand down and they were going to bring the Bothan issue up to the Senate. With the Yuuzhan Vong a member of the Galactic Alliance, and Bothawuii no longer a part of the Galactic Alliance, the Bothans would then be targeted by sanctions or military action by the Galactic Alliance as a whole. This would divide the galaxy and cause untold headaches for everyone involved.
Scenario two, Tahiri failed to convince the Yuuzhan Vong not to go the genocidal route and was coming back to warn everyone of the disaster that was about to unfold. Though only a small part of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet had arrived, just the sheer thought of a Yuuzhan Vong fleet had many break out into cold sweats.
There were other scenarios, of course, but dwelling on it built up his negatude and he knew Tahiri would disapprove of that. So instead Anakin turned back to the matters at hand.

"Solo," Grand Admiral Gilad Pellaeon acknowledged. The bags under his eyes and the wrinkled state of his uniform was evidence that he too had found sleep elusive.
"Admiral. How are things?"
"Unchanged since the death of Raynar Thul. The Killiks are continuing to hold the systems they haven't withdrawn from, systems with little strategic value. Because of that, I'm not willing to send in our ships to fight the bugs for wastelands and barren systems."
"Agreed. Until we know the Killik's next move we should keep our forces where they are."
"We have been trying to catalogue the extent of damage on the planets that did have Killiks on them, and thus far things are looking grim. We estimate over several billion Joiners were included into the Killik swarm, with many just plain missing."
"We knew it would be rough. But at least they've been stopped for now."
"It's not over yet, though. We still need to keep our ships in those damaged systems to provide security for the survivors. We can't have opportunistic pirates taking advantage of the situation. That job's a lot harder given that we lost a fair number of ships trying to repel or retake Killik forces in other systems."
"Admiral, Jedi Solo! Incoming holo-communications from the Imperial Remnant!"
Grand Admiral Pellaeon arched a surprised eyebrow at a comm-call from his native government. "Put it on."
Both Anakin and Pellaeon blinked in surprise at the sight of Jagged Fel in full Imperial uniform. The moff insignia on his lapel wasn't missed by either sharp-eyed individuals.
"Congratulations on your promotion…Moff Fel," Anakin remarked, the corners of his lips twitching in spite of himself. "Normally when one loses a war, they don't come out ahead."
"*The blame lies solely on your sister and the Imperial Jedi,"* Jagged Fel answered back. "*As pleasant as it would be otherwise, unfortunately this is not a social call."*
"Then how can the Galactic Alliance navy be of help?" Grand Admiral Pellaeon asked evenly.
"*Ships, as many as you can spare,"* Jagged replied without any prologue. "*As many soldiers as you can spare, and as many supplies as you can spare."*
"Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't the war between the Empire and the Ascendancy over?" Anakin said slowly. "Moff Quille made that announcement early yesterday."

"*He did, but he neglected the more pressing issue at hand. According to Ambassador Solo, there is a…sizably large fleet heading from the Unknown Regions towards this galaxy. At the moment they are limited in the routes they can take into this galaxy, but once they enter, their options will become limitless."*
"How large is this fleet?" The Grand Admiral scowled. "Surely the Empire and Ascendancy's forces are more than a match for the rag-tag ships we've been seeing all over this galaxy."
"*Conservative estimates? A thousand strong,"* Jagged answered shortly. "*And according to Jaina Solo, these aren't 'rag-tag' vessels or an unorganized force. Fallen Jedi Welk leads them personally and has in his employ several other Force-sensitive beings as well. Like the frost locus on Csilla, I believe they are coming here for the sole purpose of annihilating everything in its path. "*
The silence of those who heard Jagged's message produced a lull in the constant din of the situation room.
"Moff Fel, be that as it may, our forces are stretched thin enough. The Killiks withdrew from over two dozen contested worlds, but there's no telling if they'll return when our ships leave. There are already several hundred Killik vessels in the galaxy that we are trying to keep tabs on and diverting…"
"*With respect admiral. There are several times that many Killik ships coming this way. Being generous in the appraisal of the forces at my disposal, my analysts state that we can hold them for at most a month, maybe two, without any support. Given how the forces at my disposal are easily fractured along racial lines, however, I personally will half that estimate. Once we are gone, there will be no way to contain the Killiks without another prolonged war."*
"This is their 'Plan B,'" Anakin exhaled. "Either way, the Galactic Alliance is in a tight spot."
"What do you mean?"
"Jagged is right. We have to send our ships to back his forces up. The Killiks know it. You said it yourself, we're stretched thin dealing with the Killiks already in the system. Imagine millions, maybe even billions, more Killiks streaming in."
"We allocate our ships to the Imperial and Chiss sectors, we will leave the rest of the galaxy woefully undermanned. What is to stop the Killiks already here from mounting another assault?"
"Nothing," Anakin said grimly. "But if we don't sacrifice those few systems, the entire galaxy will be threatened. The Jedi Order is stretched thin, the navy and armed forces are stretched thin. What is a few dozen systems compared to the galaxy as a whole?"

"Those few dozen systems still have billions of people living in them," Pellaeon reminded Anakin. His calculating gaze darting to the young Jedi. "Billions of Galactic Alliance civilians. We can't just abandoned them."
"In any case it's not up to me to decide," Anakin shook his head. "Jagged, we'll let the Chief of State know. Hopefully you'll have our answer before your day is out."
"*It will be appreciated. Moff Fel, out.*" Jagged's hologram vanished. Retreating into a side office, both Anakin and Pellaeon released long, exhausted breaths.
Anakin met the aged admiral's gaze from across the man's desk. "Do you want to deliver the bright news, or should I?"
"If you could," Pellaeon tilted his head in assent, flicking several buttons to activate a holoscreen. "In anticipation of the senate's decision, I'll be trying to figure out which ships are essential. Truly essential and not because a senator says it is."
Anakin gave him a half-hearted salute. "Good luck with that."
"Backroom battles before the space battles, something I didn't miss with the Empire."
"What was it like in the Empire?" Anakin paused, sensing Pellaeon's need to speak. Being the leader of the galactic navy was in many ways just as lonely as being Jedi hero or avatar of the gods.
"The Emperor told you to go to one place and you did so or were shot," the older military man said with a ghost of a smile. "Might not be good for moral, but it did cut through the grandstanding and politicking."
"One person in charge of the military. The burden would be too great for most. Corruption almost guaranteed."
"Understandable. And yet, is it wrong to miss those days?" Gilad said rhetorically. "For all the evil that was Palpatine, there were benefits to his reign. There had to be for him to earn such fanatical loyalty. Why else would the spirit of the Empire continue to exist to this day, why so many systems would flock back to the Imperial Remnant?"
"It sounds like we need a happy medium," Anakin said with a soft laugh. "Maybe the Killiks were on to something. Just as the galaxy suffered when there wasn't enough Jedi influence, there's been a bit too much Jedi influence in recent years."
"Too late to do anything about that right now. The public, and most of the government, expect you Jedi to lead us to victory against the Killiks, just as you did against the Vong."
"We'll step down after this," Anakin nodded. "We have this one last thing to do first."

"It'll always be one more thing, Jedi Solo," Pellaeon rubbed at his face. "Trust me. After every conflict I always say to myself '*now I can step down' 'now the Empire I wished for, the one I fought for, can take wing.'* That time has yet to come."
"This time will be different." But even as Anakin spoke those words, they rang hollow to his own ears.
Jedi existed because the galaxy needed them to maintain the balance in the Force, or that's what generations of Jedi had been led to believe. Yet, despite the efforts of successive generations of Jedi, that balance had never been obtained. Successive generations of Jedi had been wiped out after 'maintaining the peace' for varying periods of time. As Anakin left the situation room, a morbid feeling struck him, sending an icy chill down his spine.
Unless something was done, the New Jedi Order was running out of time.
[.:(III):.]
The Myrkr Strike Team Memorial, originally founded on Dac and then moved along with the galactic government to Denon, was a simple, round room in the upper recesses of a greater war memorial. The room consisted of a frosted dome skylight, a 180 degree bank of bay windows, and marble pedestals with the names and holo-images of those who fell on Myrkr. Their ghostly blue figures smiled at one and other as they, their lives cut short so young, now kept each other company in the solemn air of the room. Their pillars were mostly neglected, a small layer of dust resting over and around them.
One pedestal wasn't.
Added upon the move to Denon was another, larger pedestal to Ganner Rhysode, positioned in the center of the room where the sunlight streaming down from above bathed it in continuous light during the day. His gilded pedestal was a popular place to visit for those wishing to walk the Way of Rhysode, and the amount of gifts and bundles of flowers in front of the pedestalseemed lopsided compared to the near bare-bones state of the other simple stone pillars.
Anakin, in full Jedi robes, stared at the room from the threshold of the doorway, his face could have been carved out of the same stone that made the pedestals. In the months he had been back in the galaxy, he hadn't managed to develop the nerve to visit the memorial. It was hard enough as it was to return to the galaxy in general, but confronting his past was something Anakin knew he wasn't good at. After all, it had taken him what seemed like forever to outgrow his fear that he would end up like his grandfather. Taken him even longer to try and redeem himself for getting Chewie killed on Sernpidal, for letting Thrackan Sal-

Solo fire Centerpoint. But Myrkr seemed to have topped them all. After all, it was because of Myrkr that the smiling faces now gazing at him were no longer among the living.
Why Saba Sebatyne lost two daughters and Tesar no longer had two sisters.
Why Waxarn Kel lost a dear friend in Eryl Besa and was driven almost to madness because of it.
Why a moving memorial ode composed to honor the life and heroics of Ulaha Kore had remained the number one song on Clak'dor for several years.
Why Jedi Apprentice Twool Drark, apprentice to Bazel Warv, pushed himself ever harder to do his big brother Jovan proud.
Why the Thul family of Alderaan would suffer the fate of so many Alderaani families and fade away, because the last hope of their line fell to his blade.
Anakin brought out a handheld holo-emitter from his robes and activated it. The image of Raynar Thul, pre-Myrkr mission, appeared, bright-eyed and youthful.
Anakin felt his eyes water as he gazed at both Raynar's hologram and the others in the room. Ganner's larger than life hologram, fist on either side of his waist and his chin thrust upwards shone brightly in the rays of the sun. Ulaha, her own hologram playing a musical instrument that had been her first love swayed to a silent tone. Eryl, a racer in another life, was surrounded by a swirling array starmaps as she stood next to her prize-winning ship. Jovan Drark's hologram was armed with a longblaster which he flourished and posed with in programmed intervals. The Hera sisters, Bela and Krasov, both seemed to emit silent hissing laughter at some joke only they knew as they posed in front of their Wild Knight starfighters.
It felt as if they were all turning in his direction as Anakin took his first step into the room, shakily exhaling as he did.
"Hey guys," Anakin said faintly. All the holograms appeared to smile, and Anakin felt his throat tighten. "Been a while."
Silence once again answered him.
"I brought Raynar to join you guys, I hope that's okay," Anakin whispered, holding up Raynar's hologram. "The senate doesn't want to give him a pedestal, but he was part of our team, right? Sorry I haven't been by since they stuffed all of you here. Busy saving the galaxy you know…Well, that and running away from the fact that my stupid idea got all you killed."
Anakin walked over to the nearest pedestal, one of the Hera sisters. He smirked wryly at the hologram as he began to use the sleeve of his Jedi

robe to clean off the fine layer of dust that had settled on it. "I know, I know, Bela, it's the Yuuzhan Vong that killed you. But you'd never have been on Myrkr if it wasn't for my half-baked idea. Sure it was an idea that was needed at the time, the voxyn had to be stopped, but….well… yeah. You and Krasov died, never got to see the galaxy without the voxyn."

Continuing on, Anakin cleaned one pedestal after another, having one-sided conversations with his former teammates as he did. Krasov, Ulaha, Ganner, a single tear managed to escape his eyes as he spoke and gazed upon their holograms.

"Jovan," Anakin smiled at the Rodian sniper. "You'll be happy to know that your little brother is doing great. From what I've heard from Barv, he's going to be an amazing fighter pilot. Rodia's also recovering, might even be inhabitable in another year or two."

Last, he moved on to the next pedestal, Eryl's. "Hey Eryl, I see Waxarn hasn't been by. We both know he'd hate this room though, using you and the others as a fancied up political statement. Heck I don't even know why I came by, just felt like I needed to, you know. Waxarn's doing a lot better, credits you with saving him back in the war, so thank you for that. I think he makes me a better person too. I… ummm…I figured you wouldn't mind sharing a space with Raynar., you were a comfort to him when Lusa died and thought that you might watch over him even now."

Anakin placed the holo-emitter next to Eryl's. He breathed deeply again and stepped back, gazing at his departed team once more. "I could use some advice though, you know, to keep others from ending up like you. The galaxy is under threat again, a hastily slapped together team is being put in place to go charging off to the distant reaches of the galaxy against overwhelming odds. The powers-that-be want me to be in charge of it. Considering my leadership doesn't exactly have the best track record, what do you think I should do?"

The holograms continued to smile at Anakin in silent understanding, and Anakin was forced to gaze out the window at the distant cityscape.

"Take the position," a soft female voice answered in turn.

Anakin glanced over his shoulder in surprise, not realizing he had let his guard down so much he hadn't heard the speaker's approach. "Lady Thul."

"Please, it's just Aryn," the Thul-family matriarch said kindly.

"I…"Anakin's eyes darted back over to Raynar's hologram, and he felt his stomach twist in knots. "I…."

"My son died on Myrkr, with the rest of these heroes," Aryn Dro Thul's voice was gentle as she entered the room, her flowing blue robe

sparkling in the sunlight as she proceeded to stop at each pedestal and offer a silent prayer. "He died alongside his friends, his real family, fighting to protect them all. The Killiks simply used his body for their own ends and you did Raynar a favor by destroying even that."
Anakin swallowed, knowing it probably wouldn't help things by revealing that some of Raynar had survived and even supported what the Killiks had been doing. "It still doesn't change the fact that he followed me and died because of it."
Aryn looked to Anakin pityingly. "It was a war, young Organa, Wars always take the best and brightest of us all, destroys good men and women and leave them little more than shells of who they once were. Raynar died trying to make the galaxy a better place, died so that other Jedi didn't have to fall at the claws of the voxyn. I may not have been the best of mothers, too worried about my family's shipping business, but Raynar did our family proud."
"If I lead another taskforce that follows a hastily thought-up plan…the stakes are so much higher this time."
"They are. But what of them?" Aryn asked, coming to a stop next to him. Her blue gaze held Eryl and Raynar's holograms, sad but not overly so. "I believe you Jedi have the maxim, do or do not, there is no try? You're either going to safeguard this galaxy or let chaos take over and wash out all that the people in this room died trying to achieve. You've learned from your mistakes, the question is not whether or not you'll get people killed, but whether or not their deaths will mean anything. People will die, but it's how they die that will matter."
Anakin closed his eyes, nodding. "I don't want to take the role of Director of the GAG."
"Isn't that not the best sort of leader? One who does not want the power but takes it until someone worthy of it comes along?"
"Doesn't mean I have to like it."
"No, it doesn't," Aryn. "But in the end, the choice is yours. If no one was expecting you to step up, if there was no intergalactic crisis at hand, would *you* step up? Would you be the leader that inspired my son to follow you on a mission few expected to return from? Or will you trust someone else to uphold the beliefs my son died fighting for."
"I *am* sorry that I…"
Aryn held up a hand. "Things happen, whether they do so because of some greater plan I don't know, nor do I care. If you truly want to make it up to me, to the families and friends of everyone represented in this room, don't give up the fight."
Anakin sighed, his head bowed. "I know. It's just…I know."

"I am truly sorry that a burden such as this is placed on your young shoulders, scion of Organa."
"I am too," Anakin said, steeling himself. "But you're right. Let's just hope the Force will be with me this time."
"Considering you are still among the living, has it not been with you thus far?"
Anakin smiled a ghost of a Solo-smile. "Guess I'm a little greedy in hoping all my friends and family make it out of this too."
"As a business woman, I can tell you first hand that a little bit of greed isn't bad," Aryn smiled faintly.
"Umm…can I ask why you're here?" Anakin asked softly.
"I was planning on making a hefty donation to the War Memorial so that my son might have a place in this room," Aryn answered. She looked back to Eryl's pedestal. "But I can see that you have already given him one. Thank you."
Anakin just bowed his head. "Thank *you*."
"Keep his memory alive, Anakin. As long as he is remembered as the person he once was, as long as his beliefs live on, that is all that matters."
"That is something I can definitely do," Anakin murmured.
Aryn patted his shoulder kindly and proceeded to the door. "That is all I ask." She paused for a moment and looked over her shoulder. "Given what you are up against, I believe it will be appropriate if I say 'May the Force be with you'."
[.:(IV):.]
Though he was seated in the meeting room full of important officials, ministers, and military leaders, his mind was still on the conversation he had had with Tahiri earlier that day. He had talked to her about several things, the Yuuzhan Vong, Cal Omas' job offer, their children, and all of that was still looping around in his head.
Having not seen his daughter or son for a week due to the combat, politics, and other galactic-sized worries, Anakin sorely missed them. He wondered if the same could be said in reverse. Both Jayce and Cassa were again with their grandparents, being spoiled royally and playing with other children from the Denon Temple. For the most part, they were naively innocent about the going-ons of the galaxy and hopefully wouldn't have to worry about such things for at least another decade or two.
Their parents, not so much.
Tahiri had given reluctant permission for Anakin to accept the post as head of the Galactic Alliance Guard. Though both loathed to accept even more responsibility for a galaxy in peril, they also knew that

Anakin was probably the best person for the job. They both agreed, however, that he would step down the moment things became stable; which they hoped was relatively soon. They just had an intergalactic war against invading space bugs, and a few other problems, to deal with before that. And the same galactic-sized worries that kept Anakin separated from his kids also affected Tahiri.

Apparently Loiric Kaan, though not in charge of the overall Yuuzhan Vong fleet, had managed to commandeer the advanced guard. Now *Warmaster* Loiric Kaan, so elected by the warriors of his advanced guard, was in charge of twenty Yuuzhan Vong capital ships and had arrived with the standard Yuuzhan Vong warrior mentality. According to Tahiri, she had her hands full trying to convince these proud warriors, seeking one last hurrah before their sunset years, that genocide was not an acceptable form of retribution. The lack of religion among many of these warriors meant that Tahiri couldn't even use her 'divine' status to order them to stand down. But Anakin had to trust that Tahiri could handle Loiric since his own plate was full with the impending Killik invasion and lack of available ships to combat it.

"Thank you all for coming," Gilad Pellaeon addressed the large gathering of individuals in the room. Among them were the non-Jedi members of the High Council and several senators from key committees. "As you all know by now, the Imperial Remnant is about to engage a Killik battle fleet many times greater than the Killiks currently in this galaxy. It is imperative we stop this second wave of Killiks or we will be overwhelmed."

"That is all well and good, Grand Admiral," one of the senators on the Defense Committee spoke up. "But we do not have the ships to spare. If we move fleets around and the Killiks already in this galaxy attack a now vulnerable planet, there will be hell to pay. Half of the Galactic Alliance is already threatening to secede if we don't meet their needs, and rightly so. Removing their only means of defense against the Killiks would be the final straw."

"And we can't just move a few ships around," Director of Intelligence, Belindi Kalenda, spoke. "There would be too few in number to make any difference. Either we devote all of our resources to this and risk losing several systems in the interim, or we don't move any ships at all and hope the Remnant can at least slow the Killik advance."

"My constituents would never go for it," another senator spoke, shaking his head. "And you definitely cannot afford to lose the support of the Corporate Sector Authority. We're supplying a third of the resources for the restoration projects."

"If these new Killiks join up with the Killiks already in this galaxy, then it won't matter," Communications' Minister, Pal'iva Konat argued. "We can spin this however we want, but the fact of the matter is, if we revert to our pre-Vong 'this is my territory, my resources' mentality we're going to get a lot of people killed."
"What about the Outer Rim Security Fleet?" Justice Minister Ta'laam Ranth asked. "They're decorated. And with fifty capital ships, it's sizable enough."
"They're helping to prop up the Tion government and maintain stability in former Hutt Space," General Farlander answered. "Half their fighter-squadrons are spread out taking down pirate groups."
"But if we move them to the Remnant, the Outer Rim will revolt for sure," the Outer Rim Relief Minister argued. "They're already incensed that credits are being spent first on core-ward planets and suffer near daily pirate problems despite your security fleet."
"Well we certainly can't pull ships away from the core-worlds," the Mon Calamari Finance Minister voiced. "They're the heart and soul of this government and any instability will ripple through the galaxy like a rogue wave."
"I have a question," Anakin said, quieting the developing argument.
"Go ahead," Cal Omas inclined his head.
"The Galactic Alliance Guard. How many ships would they have?"
Cal Omas raised an eyebrow. "Much of the GAG fleet is still being built but we were going to keep the number at thirty-five capital ships."
"And how many of the ships are ready right now?"
Cal Omas looked to an aide, who quickly handed him a datapad.
"Eighteen capital ships, two-thirds of the fighter compliment and half of the frigate and light-cruisers. We're pulling some of the vessels from existing fleets in addition to the ones being made. What are you suggesting, Jedi Solo?"
"Despite Director Kalenda's assertion that doing this piecemeal won't work, we might not have a choice. We can't defend the perimeter only to have the interior fall apart, and we can't safeguard the interior if the exterior threat will crush it. The Killiks in this galaxy are currently in a holding position, not attacking or withdrawing. True they might return to being active once our ships leave, but it's a risk we have to take. At the moment, those with the largest fleet groups outside the Remnant are the Hapans, Corellians, Bakurans, and Corporate Sector."
"You forget the Yuuzhan Vong," the Yuuzhan Vong senator Fal Tiivik spoke.
"Until the rest of the fleet gets here, we don't know what they will do though," Anakin said politely. "They could just as easily attack

Bothawuii and tie up the Bothans and their own vessels. What I'm suggesting is that we start sending every available ship whenever they become available. Get the word out to everyone who has a combat-ready vessel to head towards the Remnant. They don't have to go all at once, we can send a few from the riskier sectors and see what happens. We then shift coverage as things settle."
"And who would command all these ships?" Pellaeon raised an eyebrow. "As much as I would jump at the chance to return home, my duties as the Galactic Alliance's Supreme Commander will keep me here."
"Chief of State, I believe you said that the Galactic Alliance Guard's leader would have powers third only to your office and the Senate?"
"That's correct," Cal Omas leveled an even stare at Anakin. "Am I correct in assuming you wish to take the job?"
"Wish, no," Anakin said impassively. "I don't want the title, but it's necessary. We need ships, we need someone others will trust to lead *their* ships, and we need someone who doesn't play by the Galactic Alliance military's handbook. The Killiks have seen it all. I can lead whatever part of the GAG fleet is ready and shore up the Remnant."
"There is a large chance we won't be able to send you the number of ships you need," Cal Omas warned. "And withdrawal won't be an option once the battle starts. We'd have mass panic on our hands if you are seen retreating and more Killiks enter the galaxy."
"I know," Anakin said steadily. "We don't have a choice though. Minister Konat can spin this as the Galactic Alliance Guard's inaugural act—defending the galaxy against both itself and the greater threat on the horizon. Any ship that wants to join can, this galaxy is everyone's home after all. And if we don't get enough ships, well, maybe the inaugural act will be the GAG's last."
Eyes darted around the table. Anakin could sense their thoughts. Most were going to agree with the plan simply because there was no risk to themselves. The politicians who were up for re-election were all for sanctioning this small force if it meant that their own sectors could maintain the security fleets protecting them. The politicians on their way out knew that this was probably the last act they would allow in office and wanted it to be a memorable one. And the military officers involved all understood the politics in play and would go along with whatever allowed them to best do their job.
Cal Omas looked at the other members of the High Council. "Then since most of us are here, as well as a fair portion of governmental ministers, I say we put this to a vote. All in favor of selecting Jedi Knight Anakin Solo as the first head of the Galactic Alliance Guard?"

Hands were raised near unanimously. The few hold outs seemed dubious that such a small force being sent to help would make any difference.
"Then it's settled," Cal Omas met Anakin's gaze. "You'll take what ships we have available. Supreme Commander Pellaeon will continue to use the rest of the ships to keep the Killiks already in this galaxy under control. In the meantime, I'll get in touch with the leaders of the various worlds and see how many ships they're willing to part with. I'll try to stress that they'll all be destroyed in any case if the Killik fleet succeeds in entering this galaxy."
Anakin kept his face emotionless as he nodded. "Then, let's hope the Force is with us. Otherwise… well…let's not think about that."
"Indeed," Pellaeon said dryly. "Good luck out there. You're going to need it."
[.:(V):.]
Anakin's expression was soft as he tucked the sheets around his daughter's sleeping figure, a hand gently caressing her small face. Late at night, well past the time he too should be sleeping, plans upon plans continued to cycle through his mind. A decade ago he would have plunged carefree into the next galactic problem. Another Myrkr? Sure, it would have just been a chance to redeem the first one. But now… now he had a wife, two children, their futures in addition to his own to think of.
As if defending the galaxy against its nightmares wasn't scary enough. Could he still be a good dad, a good husband, if he was constantly away fighting the never-ending battle against the darkness that tried to consume the galaxy? It wasn't like there was some guide-book for someone in his position, a 'How to be a Great Dad, Avatar of the Gods, Future Grandmaster, and Galactic Symbol of Hope at the Same Time: In Three Easy Steps' he could just look up on the HoloNet.
He released a low breath, stepping back from his daughter's bed and silently reaching out to the Force for answers.
The Force replied in the voice of his mother.
"You have two amazing children, Anakin," Leia Solo said tenderly.
Anakin looked up to see his mother in the doorway backlit by the dim hallway light. With a wry smile he glanced back down to his sleeping daughter. "How'd you do it, mom?"
"Fight the galaxy and leave you and your brother and sister behind?" Leia murmured. "Looking back, I really don't know how I did it either. It's hard to fight for a family you rarely see, and the more you fight, the more time you lose. Han and I missed so much running about the

galaxy. Your first words, Jacen's first steps, so much more. Han and I were practically glued to the holo-vids Winter sent over."
"Was it worth it?" Anakin looked to his mom once more.
Leia stepped forward, placing a hand on Anakin's back. "I wish I could say yes. You, Jacen, Jaina, all have become such fine people, Jedi, in spite of Han and my poor parenting. But there are moments…moments when I wish for a time that could have been and never will be. The galaxy is what it is, and like my brother is so fond of saying, we have to stick with the present and prepare for the future. You want a galaxy for Cassa and Jayce to grow up in? One where they can just be kids? Then do what you have to do. Besides Han and I rather enjoy having them over."
"Making up for lost time?" Anakin said with a sad smile.
"You could say that," Leia nodded. She gazed at Cassa. "She is so much like her mother, but has your curious nature."
"That is going to get her in so much trouble when she grows up," Anakin chuckled. "It's like cramming the things that got Tahiri and I into trouble into one person."
Leia laughed at that, and gently guided Anakin out of the room. "At least she will have a family that loves her."
"More people to pull into whatever Solo-style plan she'll devise."
"True," Leia shook her head ruefully. "You and your siblings gave Han and myself enough gray hairs, it's only fair you get to experience it from the other side."
"How *are* you and dad?" Anakin slid into a chair at the dining table of Han and Leia's apartment. "I've barely seen you since getting to Denon."
Leia poured him a cup of water and sat down across from him. "Tired. But it's a good kind of tired. Despite Kenth's apparent pre-election victory, there are a lot of things we've been doing to slowly separate the Jedi from the workings of the Galactic Alliance. And from the fractures in the Galactic Alliance, we're also trying to control how the government might bend or break when it does."
"Is it true the Bakurans are going to secede? I talked with Malinza earlier about having the Bakurans chip in a few of their ships and she was noncommittal."
"According to Senator Thanas, they have every intention of seceding," Leia said with a wan nod. "They also have every right to despite the short-sighted nature of the decision. The Bakuran Hegemony is self-sufficient, stable, and has been hemorrhaging credits in an effort to support their Galactic Alliance neighbors."

Anakin just shook his head with annoyed disbelief. "It's like all the lessons learned in the Yuuzhan Vong War were tossed aside the moment they stopped being convenient."
"Listen, it might seem impossible now, but we'll get through this. We have before."
"It just seems to take more and more every time though."
"And if we don't even try, we've failed before we've begun," Leia said with a knowing lift of her eyebrows. "What's on your mind, Anakin?"
"You've heard of the Galactic Alliance Guard initiative?"
"Of course, how could I not ha…" Leia studied Anakin for a moment. "You took the position?"
"I had to," Anakin felt a strange urge to defend his decision to his mom. It took one mother to convince him to take the position, another to reassure him it was okay to do so, but now this mom felt as if she was the most important one."Jaina needs ships to back her up, and this was the fastest way I could get them out to her. Everything is so tied up in politics now, we would have been debating troop deployments even with the Killiks in orbit."
"I know. And no matter what I think, what's done is done. Does this mean you'll be leaving for the frontlines then?"
"End of the week," Anakin replied. "But I'll be spending the rest of the week taking inventory of who's coming. I think they're finally giving my own Star Destroyer and everything, like Jace and Jaya. Well technically, my own fleet, but Jaina and Jacen already have several of those."
Leia emitted a small snort of laughter. "Still competing with your siblings, Anakin?"
Anakin smiled sheepishly. "At least I can say I gave you and dad grandkids first."
"Like babies and fleets are even remotely related," Leia rolled her eyes. She then sobered. "I want you to be careful out there Anakin. Look after your big sister, but also let her look after you. You're *my* kid and I can't help but worry."
"Mom, I'm twenty-seven years old."
"You'll always be my youngest, Anakin," Leia wagged a finger at him. "Let me be a mother when I can."
Now it was Anakin's turn to roll his eyes, but he smiled and nodded. "Take care of Jaya, let her look after me, got it. Think Jace will find a way to get the Hapans out to the other side of the galaxy? It'd be nice to have him at Jaina and my side as we stomp bugs."
"If it were anyone else but your brother, I'd say no. But he does have a certain influence with the ruler of the Consortium. Who knows? Maybe

your father might even clean off the *Falcon* and bring with him a bunch of mid-life-crisis-suffering smugglers into battle."
Anakin continued to grin. "Tendra would flay Lando in a heartbeat, and Karrde *knows* he's too old to be flying suicide missions."
"Don't ever underestimate those young at heart," Leia said sagely, though she too smiled as she sipped from a mug.
"Well, if dad starts getting the urge to reenact his glory days tell him his granddaughter still wants him around."
"That would definitely keep him here," Leia chuckled. "You trained her well, she has him wrapped around her little finger."
"Do you think she'll mind me and Tahiri being away for so long? The longest we've ever left her side on Zonama was two days. I have no idea how long the battle with the Killiks will take, but it'll take at least two days just to get out there."
"She'll understand when she gets older," Leia said softly. "Just make sure you're still around for her when that happens."
Anakin rubbed tiredly at his face. "You know, I have no idea when things changed so much. It was like one day I was just a kid, not knowing how greatly my action affected everyone. Then I wake up the next day, and suddenly I have all these responsibilities, all these people looking to me for answers and guidance. And I….I don't know, I guess I feel obligated or that I owe the galaxy or something. If the others trust me that much, I have to step up to show they were right. If it wasn't for Tahiri, for Jaina, and Jacen…I don't know where I'd be."
"Remember that," Leia said solemnly. "You'll never be alone with them at your side, so don't ever think you are. No matter how many responsibilities you pick up, how many people look to you, you have people you can look to as well. Even your father. Who by the way, would be elated if you asked him for advice. Remember where he came from, he was a smuggler with a death mark and ended up becoming one of the Rebellion's top generals almost overnight."
Anakin fell silent at that. Despite the heartfelt reunion after his seven years on Zonama, he had never truly repaired the relationship he had with his father. From Chewbacca's death during the war to the arguments they had had leading up to Myrkr, there was still a niggling something that kept Anakin from turning to his father for support. And as his mother had pointed out, it wasn't as if Han had been there for him a lot when he was growing up. His closest male role-model had been, strangely enough, Jacen and Luke. And considering their current philosophical differences, they weren't exactly the first people he'd go to.

As if sensing Anakin's thoughts, Leia reached out across the table to grip Anakin's hand. "Your father and I won't be around forever, and though I hope we have many more years yet to come, I've learned long ago, lost too many friends, to know not to take anything for granted. Talk with your father before you head to the front-lines. Another shoulder to lean on, another ear, never hurt anyone."
"Okay, mom," Anakin exhaled. "Okay. I'll talk with dad."
"I'll make sure he'll be at the *Falcon*'s hangar tomorrow morning. He wanted to talk to you anyways."
"About what?"
"You'll find out when you meet with him."
"Alright. Tomorrow morning then."
Needless to say, Anakin spent a very restless night after the conversation. He couldn't help but worry, and he didn't have Tahiri to chastise him about his unhealthy negatude level. Unlike other conflicts he had planned, the fate of the galaxy literally hinged on whether or not he could come up with something to battle against impossible odds.
Fortunately, his morning started out with a small surprise. Cassa greeted him with a hug, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, and then scowled at him.
"Daddy!"
"What did I do?"
"Mommy said you have too much negatude!"
"Huh?"
"When I was sleeping, mommy used the Force to talk to me. She said you were thinking too hard and was making it hard for *her* to sleep. And those warrior ships don't have *hau polyp* for beds and they stink like a *vua'sa*'s armpit, so she has to sleep on those cold, hard surfaces that those silly warriors like to sleep on. And you know how she likes soft and comfy beds, especially if you're hugging her. So stop making it hard for mommy to sleep."
Anakin could only smile at Cassa's pouting face and sent off a mental apology to his significant other. "Okay, okay, no more negatude." He bent down and lifted her up. "What do you want for breakfast?"
"Cereal and milk."
"Glad you're easy to please," Anakin said fondly, carrying her to the dining table. He then set her down in a chair. "Cassa, I'm going to have to go away for a bit."
"Like mommy?"

"Uh huh. But don't worry, I'll be back as soon as I can. Your grandma and grandpa are going to watch over you and Jayce while I'm gone, okay?"
"How long are you going to be gone? Will you be back before dinner?"
"Probably not," Anakin shook his head regretfully. He floated a bowl from the cabinet over to Cassa, and allowed her to take control of it and set it down onto the table. He made a motion towards the refrigerator door and raised a challenging eyebrow at Cassa, who mimicked his action, only pulling on the Force as she did. The door opened, and a beaming Cassa looked to her dad. "Great job. Can you bring the milk over?"
Licking her lips and scrunching her tiny forehead, Cassa held out a hand and concentrated once more. The carton of milk shook, then lifted off the shelf. Cassa, while worrying her lower lip, continued to float the carton of milk over to the table.
"I did it!" She exclaimed proudly when the milk carton plopped onto the table with an audible thud.
"You're going to be a great Jedi," Anakin laughed, pouring the milk manually. "And to answer your question, I don't know when I'll be back. So be good for your grandma and grandpa."
"Okay daddy." Cassa nodded. "Can I play with my friends from the Denon Temple while you're gone? It's fun not being the only Jedi, well, besides Jedis'sei. And there are so many species there, and lots and lots of languages being spoken at the temple, and…"
"Of course," Anakin laughed, cutting her off with a smile. "I'm going to go check on Jayce and then I'm off to work."
"Love you daddy."
"You too, Cassa." The bright and innocent nature of his daughter temporarily turned everything right and Anakin couldn't help but feel his spirits lift *Thanks, Tahiri. Love you too.*
He could feel the emotions behind Tahiri's cross-galaxy message reverberate back through their bond, and he ran a hand through his hair. It was time to go to work.
[.:(VI):.]
"Hey dad," Anakin said awkwardly, entering the hangar. His dad was on top of the *Falcon,* tinkering with yet another set of circuits that had probably long out-lived their expected life span.
"Anakin. Give me a moment, will you?" Han called back, holding up a finger. "Okay, Threepio, turn it on."
There was an audible whine, and Han visibly held his breath as he glared at the set of circuits. A set of lights lit up and the whine turned

into a steady hum. Han released his breath, looking pleased with himself.
"Keep it on for a while, let the rest of the *Falcon* get used to it."
"Get used to 'it'?" Anakin asked. He used the Force to hop onto the ship to join his father.
"New shield generator," Han said with a roguish grin. "Well that and upgraded guns."
"Can the power core handle the extra draw?"
"It could probably handle twice as much," Han said, patting the ship affectionately. "These newer tech are a lot more energy efficient. The question is whether or not the power core will burn *them* out."
"If you upgrade the power regulators you'll be able to better control the energy flux cycles. Sienar Fleet systems has a newer model they made for their *Turbulent*-class Star Destroyers."
"Yeah, but the Corellian models are cheaper and can get the job done just the same. Plus they're good for at least a decade or two. Sienar has to upgrade their models practically every five years because of the corners they cut."
"If that's the case, you should go with Koensayr's Mu-PR model. It came out when the Emperor was riding around in his Death Star and is dirt cheap. The output to consumption ratio is twice as better as the Corellian model of the same year. "
"There's a reason they stuck the Koensayr power regulators into Y-wings. You know how slow those regulators made those bombers. For two giant engines those things were energy-hogs, and that was mostly due to the inefficiency of their regulators. I *have* been doing this for a while, kid."
Anakin chuckled, sharing a rare smile with his dad. He gestured to the exposed relays Han had been working on. "Any reason you needed to upgrade the shields and guns?"
"Call it instinct. Started tinkering with her after you led that mission down into the undercity. With your luck, you'd probably be roped into something bigger. Looks like I was right."
"Mom will never let you go out in her, you know."
"I know, this isn't for me though."
"Dad?"
Han released a slow breath and looked to his son. "It's for you."
Anakin's eyes grew round. "What?"
"I want you to take her. Even with all the advancements in tech, she's still the fastest ship in the galaxy. And if you're heading off to where your mother tells me you're going, you're going to need a fast ship."
"But….but she's the *Falcon.* I know how much she means to you."

"I'm not *giving* her to you, I'm loaning her to you. Big difference," Han said wryly. "I fully expect you to return with her in one piece. And you'll pay for any damages. That reminds me, Lando still hasn't paid me back for that dish he lost on that Death Star run. 'Not a scratch' my backside."
"Are you sure, dad?"
Han grew serious. "I may be getting older but I still know what I'm doing. If you command from one of those giant capital cruisers you'll stick out like a sore thumb. Plus, it's a pain to try to maneuver an entire cruiser when surrounded by enemies, trust me I know. When I was in *Mon Remonda* hunting Zsinj, lugging an entire fleet around with me, practically everyone knew where I was. A lot harder to keep track of the *Falcon* than a giant triangle in the middle of space."
"You've made your point. If you're really sure, I'll take the *Falcon*. Maybe even have Jaina pilot it."
"You're still paying for the damages," Han said dryly. "I know how your sister flies."
Anakin smiled at that and looked away. "Thanks."
Han swallowed heavily, looking in the opposite direction. "Look, I know we're not…well, I know I'm probably not number one on your HoloNet speed dial. Probably not even in the top ten. And a lot of that is my fault."
"I did spend seven years outside of the galaxy."
"I didn't say *all* of it was my fault." Han and Anakin exchanged weak smiles before glancing at anywhere but each other. "Your mom told me that you were feeling a bit overwhelmed with the whole 'leading an army' role you decided to take up."
"Just a little."
"A little," Han snorted. "Right. After I helped your uncle blow up the Death Star and the powers that be made me a general, I was just a little overwhelmed too. I went from looking after just myself to supervising a giant faction of a rebel movement against a galactic empire. Big leap. All I did was be selfish enough to stay out of the battle until the very end, and then shoot down a single TIE fighter, and suddenly I'm a galactic hero earning a medal?"
"I had to do even less," Anakin said. "With my name, everyone expected me to do something good or bad right from the start. I was both a Solo, and the next 'Anakin'. Didn't help that I was stronger in the Force than most Jedi and liked solving puzzles of the galactic kind."
"What I'm saying kid is to go with the flow," Han said with a sigh, running a hand through his graying hair. "I'm no expert on these things, but I have been through a lot. From what I've learned, just

know that life happens. It's how you react to it that matters. You can fight it, complain about it, but life will still happen. Me, I was kind of swept up in it, had no idea where I was going, and look where I am now. Great wife, three kids a lot smarter than me, more holo-dramas about my life than I keep track of. Even if things seem dark and overwhelming, endure it the best you can because it ain't going to last forever, and you'll be stronger for it when it's over. Same goes for the good times too, enjoy *them* when you can because they won't last forever either. Like your mom, and you and your brother and sister, the reward for going through all that trouble will be more than you can imagine."
"I hope so, I have a pretty good imagination."
"You make it through this craziness and you'll get whatever it is you're thinking of and more."
Anakin nodded. "Thanks, dad."
Han gestured towards the ladder. "Come on. Let me show you a few of the improvements I made. Should help you blast a few intergalactic space bugs a lot easier."
With a smile Anakin followed his dad back down to the hangar floor. The rest of the morning was spent shooting the breeze, getting to know his father once more as they prepared the *Falcon* for yet another chapter in her storied life.
[.:(VII):.]
"The Bothans are sitting this one out, as are the Bakurans, but we have support from Tion and the Corellians. Here's the final tally, Jedi Knight Solo," Jedi Apprentice Hedda no-last-name held up a datapad for Anakin to take. "Supreme Commander Pellaeon was admitted into the hospital earlier today for exhaustion, but he sends his regards."
Reviewing the numbers, Anakin let out a low whistle. "How did he do it? Look at this, Hedda. He managed to draw ships from every fleet and maintain the happiness of the senators in those sectors at the same time."
Taking the datapad back, Hedda scanned it. "But most of these are light cruisers, frigates."
"Easier to part with," Anakin said. "If you move a Mon Cal cruiser or Star Destroyer, you have people worried. They're visible symbols people have come to rely on. You don't see the *Sacheen*-class escort ship or *ShaShore*-class frigates on recruitment posters. Most people haven't even heard of those class of ships but both have been around for almost two decades already. In this case, ships are ships, I'll take them when I can."

On the bridge of the *Nebula*-class Star Destroyer the *Sunrider*, Anakin was watching the final ships fall into formation in preparation for the jump to lightspeed. Fresh out of the factory-line and originally due to enter service in another fleet, the *Sunrider* was reassigned to the equally new Galactic Alliance Guard Home Defense fleet and now served as Anakin's command ship.

In charge of the fleet was Admiral Nek Bwua'tu, recently promoted by Pellaeon despite the fierce opposition the elder Imperial had faced. Since seceding from the Galactic Alliance, the Bothans were not exactly popular, and despite Nek Bwua'tu ignoring the order by Bothawuii to return home, he faced much distrust in the political sphere of things.

Upon hearing Hedda's earlier announcement about the Bothans not sending any ships, he harrumphed, walking along the bridge catwalk with the two. "Sometimes I wonder if the leaders of my people forget what it means to truly be Bothan. Maybe we should take this fleet and swing by Bothawuii to help them see the error of their ways."

"For some reason, I don't think dropping out of orbit with nearly a hundred ships is going to help," Anakin said dryly. "Besides, I'm sure the Yuuzhan Vong are thinking the same thing, and the last thing we want is to start a shooting match. We have too few ships as it is."

"So there's the seventy capital ships Supreme Commander Pellaeon scrounged from all of the defense fleets, the eighteen from the Galactic Alliance Guard, seven from Tion, and fifteen from Corellia," Hedda recited. "Is it going to be enough?"

"Not nearly," Anakin said with a forced smile. "But better Jaina gets these ships than none at all."

"Admiral! Jedi Knight Solo! Hyperspace disturbance off the starboard side!"

"Oh?" Admiral Bwua'tu's furry eyebrows rose at the sensor operator. "Who's our new arrivals?"

"Detecting seventeen Bothan Assault Cruisers, thirty Bothan frigates."

"I thought the Bothans were staying on the sidelines. That's like a third of their armed forces," Anakin said in surprise. He could feel several Force signatures aboard the newly arrived ships and that only added to his astonishment. He looked to Nek, who just shook his own head in response.

"I'm the wrong person to ask about the actions of my people. I've been out of the loop since they seceded."

"Receiving a hail."

"We'll take it in the communication's alcove," Anakin nodded. With Nek and Hedda, they quickly took the short walk to the holo-comm system.

A black-furred female Bothan was waiting for them over the emitter.
"*Admiral Bwua'tu, Jedi Knight Solo, I'm glad I caught you in time."*
"You're Asyr Sei'lar, opposition leader," Nek noted mildly. "The last I heard the Bothan Council put out a warrant for your arrest. Treason and sedition was it?"
"*They're probably adding hijacking of Bothan military property and a few other charges right about now. But the situation called for drastic measures,"* Asyr acknowledged. "*The Bothan military is split at the moment. I have with me all willing to disgrace their clan and place in our society to protect this galaxy. There are others but they can't help out due to political reasons. Additionally, with the loss of our fleet in the Hapes Consortium, we can't in good nature leave our own homeworld defenseless so more stayed behind for that reason."*
Anakin nodded. "Understandable, thank you for bringing who you could. Might I ask, I also sense several Jedi."
"*This wouldn't have been possible without their help. Jedi Saav'etu came up and led the hijacking of these ships, so much of the credit should go to her. I also have with me Jedi Knight Kolir Hu'lya, and a relative of the admiral, Jedi Knight Yantahar Bwua'tu. Their roles are not to be diminished either."*
"Great, as if my clan lost enough honor with my defection," Nek grumbled, rolling his eyes. "Well then…should I call you admiral considering you now lead a fleet?"
"*Please no, I may have been a pilot in my youth, but I'm more of a politician these days. Jedi Knight Saav'etu said she is willing to lead our people provided it's okay with you. Apparently she studied under General Antilles during the war and is confident enough to take on such a burden."*
"I have no problem with that."
"*That's a relief. I will let her know. She is currently attending to a… crisis of conscious amongst some of our number. Apparently our government decided to arrest members of their clan in retaliation for our little stunt and many are having second thoughts. Harder still since the government is threatening to execute the heads of their families if they don't return."*
Anakin closed his eyes, pained. "I'll let Yaqeel do what she does best then and speak with her later. Our fleet moves out in another hour so get set up for the next group of jumps."
"*Understood, Hubris out.*"
Admiral Bwua'tu gaped at the hologram. "She actually named her flag the *Hubris*? A Bothan rebel leader naming her ship *Hubris*. And I recognize the vessel she's in, it was once called the *Will of Bothawuii*."

Despite the mood, Anakin chuckled. "No wonder why your government hates her."
"She does have some sense of style," Nek nodded, grinning a toothy Bothan smile. "So, that's another several dozen ships to add to the roll-call. A couple hundred more and we might give the Killiks pause."
"We'll make do with what we have," Anakin inclined is head. He looked to the comm-officer. "Any word from the Yuuzhan Vong advanced fleet?"
"No sir."
Anakin stretched out his presence to gauge the emotions of his wife. Finding her frustrated, exasperated, and all the emotions one can expect from someone dealing with die-hard Yuuzhan Vong warriors with a grudge, but otherwise okay, Anakin let her be. "They'll probably join us out in Remnant space."
"'Probably,'" Admiral Bwua'tu snorted. "It's probably best if they don't. I'm not sure about the others Sei'lar brought with her, but I for one don't want to work alongside those people. The ar'krai declared by my government still remains in effect, and though we might not back our government, the ar'krai is a sacred duty taken up by *all* Bothans."
"Can you hold off on blasting these Yuuzhan Vong until after the Killiks are dealt with?"
"I will…try to."
"Thanks," Anakin said sardonically. "Because it would really be rude if we kill each other off before the Killiks get here. I mean, they are bringing probably their entire population here for that, so let's not disappoint them."
Hedda, who had been listening to her own comlink, nodded and then looked up. "Jedi Solo, the last of the Denon and Ossus Jedi have docked their assigned ships. The readiness reports continue to pour in, at the moment, not counting the Bothans, eighty-five percent of the fleet is ready to make the jump."
Anakin stared at the fleet massing outside and released a breath. "Greatest gathering of warships since the Yuuzhan Vong War."
"All yours to command," Admiral Bwua'tu said solemnly.
"Yipee for me," Anakin said sarcastically.
"Do you want to address the fleet?" Hedda asked.
Anakin shook his head. "They don't need me to tell them what is at stake or how dangerous this is."
Admiral Bwua'tu cleared his throat. "But this *is* the first mission for the Galactic Alliance Guard. Don't forget about the reporters the senate wanted us to take along."
Anakin groaned. "You're right. Thanks, admiral."

Hedda flipped a few switches on the holo-emitter and then looked to Anakin. "Whenever you're ready."
Anakin stepped into view of the camera a stared at the glowing blue light. "This is Director Anakin Solo of the Galactic Alliance Guard to all allied vessels. In less than an hour we'll be departing for the very edge of known space to battle a creature we know little of. We don't know why the Killiks are doing what they are doing, but at the moment, that does not matter. Our goal is to stop them in their tracks, to restore this galaxy back to the peace it had enjoyed in the few years following the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War.
The Galactic Alliance Guard is the shield that will protect this galaxy. We may be outnumbered, yet it should not matter. If a few disgruntled senators could found a movement that would undermine a galactic government ruled by a Sith Lord, if Ewoks could bring down the military might of a professional army, if a slave caste could rise up and overthrow trained warriors and overcome centuries of abuse, then we can fight and win against whatever odds we face.
We fight the Killiks because they threaten everything we've built, everything our friends and family members have died trying to achieve. We fight so others do not have to, so the rest of the galaxy can begin to heal. This galaxy is our home and I am grateful that those of you here are willing to defend it despite the political difficulties you may be facing. In the big picture, those political difficulties are why we must fight. We fight to have the option to live as we want to. To, strangely enough, have the chance to fight amongst each other because there are no greater threats abroad.
This is our galaxy, our home. Let's go and stomp some bugs."
[.:(Chapter End):.]

Interlude
(^-I-^)
All of Hapes was celebrating the defeat of the Killiks. Fireworks were bursting in the glowing green night's sky on a nightly basis since the word had spread, and all manner of revelry could be heard from *Tenel Ka Chume'dan* and cities throughout the capital planet of the Consortium. With the resounding successes against the foreign invaders, and the preservation of the Heritage Council's families, the Royal Family was receiving accolades from every social strata. The vote to support treaties with the outside galaxy had easily passed and was quickly stamped into law. In short order, Hapes was now open for business.

It was a joyous time, made even greater by the influx of wealth created by the said treaties. For the first time in millennia Hapans were engaging in trade outside of the Transitory Mists and, as Mallie Marek had predicted, found that their goods were in high demand as well. With the arrival of the first trading convoys at the end of the week came all manner of goods. And it wasn't just the nobles benefiting, the common folk felt the increase in available capital as well. If anyone had a negative thought against the Royal Family, it was quickly forgotten in the euphoria of the twin economic and military victories.

Even the commanding officers of every campaign were being toasted as heroes, their tales being told and retold, becoming greater in daring and accomplishments each time. The military was behind the Queen Mother, the nobility was behind her, and so were most everyone in the sixty-three systems she oversaw.

The situation on Hapes couldn't have been better, with improvements being made in the lives of all Hapans almost daily.

For General Zekk, Jedi Knight of the Royal House of Zel, he was enjoying one of the many improvements in his personal life in the privacy of the Royal House of Zel's ancestral home. Far away from the hustle and bustle of the main city, new life was being breathed into the once abandoned villa.

Having just returned from one of the many obligatory afternoon functions, two figures moved with frantic fervor through one of the upper-story hallways.

Heated kisses were shared with the same wild passion that the two used to embrace life as the sunlight streamed through the windows of the house. The picture frames on one of the wood-lined walls shook slightly as he pinned Taryn's body with his own against the sleek boards. One of his hands continued to frame her face, thumb stroking the smooth, sun-bronzed skin of her cheek as she coyly looked back up at him. His other hand held both her own, trapped as they were behind her within the sleeves of her trademark black leather jacket. She tried to wiggle a hand loose to touch him, but her effort was in vain as Zekk kept his grip firm around her wrists.

"Zekk," Taryn's breathing was uneven, her words groaned out half in lust, half in frustration. As tall and as strong as she was, Zekk was taller and had the unfair advantage of the Force. She hooked a leg around his, grinding herself against his thigh in an effort to convince him to free her. It probably wasn't the smartest of choices, as it made coherent thought for her even more difficult. Panting, she looked up at her dark-haired lover and he returned her ardor-filled gaze with dark green eyes. "We're wearing too much clothes."

"Do you have a solution for that?" Zekk murmured, pulling her arms further behind her to force her chest into his. Zekk had the Force, and intimate knowledge of her body. He let his other hand drop between them and lightly cupped her center through her leather pants, applying only the slightest of pressure which caused Taryn to jerk in his grip and temporarily forget how to speak. He withdrew his hand, and Taryn's eyes fluttered shut. "Hmmm? I didn't catch that Taryn."

"Y…eah, you can take off your…" Taryn's sentence died on her tongue, her body quaking against his and her eyes flying open as he pressed his thigh up between her legs against her center with much more force than his hand. Fully in control, he rocked her back and forth on his leg, causing Taryn to shudder, her head falling forward to rest on Zekk's shoulder as she fought the latest sensations. But it was a losing battle. Mewling, writhing in an attempt to free her hands even as she unashamedly ground herself against his leg, she made a herculean effort to get out her next words through her pleasure-numbed mind. "Zekk, stars, please."

The sheer want in her voice was enough. Zekk crushed his lips against hers and walked them back towards the bed, his Jedi robe falling to the ground at the doorway of the room. As was the case the previous times they had made love earlier in the week, he was barely in control of his actions.

With beams of golden sunlight filtering through the bedroom window and setting her crimson locks aglow, she looked absolutely breathtaking. He swallowed heavily and almost worshipfully brushed her cheek once more, his normally tightly controlled emotional barriers completely non-existent. Taryn was just so full of life, full of passion, that he couldn't help but find her desirable.

Very desirable, he mentally amended as the feel of her want and pleasure mingled in an arousing tune in the Force that kept him painfully ready for her. Beads of sweat dripped from his mussed-up dark hair as he struggled to control himself, his eyes a deep forest green as he worked her leather jacket off her arms.

Her black jacket joined his Jedi robes on the floor, and the moment her hands were free, they immediately flew up and began to help in the removal of the rest of his clothing. His Jedi tunic followed. Her green synthi-leather top next. Their actions were almost frenzied, their need skyrocketing as her bare breasts rubbed against his chest in primal reflex. Instinctively pressing themselves harder against one and other, they barely managed to kick off their pants and boots before tumbling onto the bed in another heated kiss.

Zekk rolled Taryn onto her back, hands stretched out above her head, and Taryn suddenly found herself immobilized. She was able to feel everything but was unable move anything but her head.
"Zekk," Taryn groaned again in pained desire. She felt his fingertips graze the insides of her thighs, and her head thrashed left and right, her gray eyes glazing over as he took his time to tease and caress the sensitive flesh.
"You did say I should indulge that darker part of me every once in a while," Zekk murmured into her ear, bringing his hand back up to cup one of her breasts, his thumb circling her rigid nipple with agonizing precision. He then bent down and blew on the other nub—pale pink in the sunlight—until it was equally achy and hard, earning a breathy gasp from his very willing captive. "So that's what I think I'll do. I think I'll…indulge myself for a little bit. What do you think?"
"N…not what I meant," Taryn panted, feeling as if she would go out of her mind as her lover tormented her in the most delicious of ways. His hot breath on her skin, his calloused, powerful hands toying with her body with impunity. He deliberately avoided her achingly stiff nipples as rubbed and caressed the rest of her breasts, and with the Force restraining her there was nothing she could do about it.
"Oh? Tell me, what did you mean?" Zekk said conversationally, his hands sliding down to explore the lean musculature of her thighs once more. He could feel her body involuntarily tremble as he let his fingertips glide along her heated skin. "You do owe me, you know. Teasing me at that party, whispering all those things to me right before I had to talk to those nobles. Not to mention last night. Now *that* was being mean."
Taryn let out a guttural whimper, the feel of his strong hands along the smooth inside of her thighs had her strain against her invisible bonds in a futile attempt to force his hands higher. She was a fighter, but no amount of fighting would help her get through what her lover was doing to her. Being unable to move, kept on the brink as her lover used the Force to read her every reaction, it was nearly more than she could endure. And the fact that Zekk knew just how much she could take, and where she needed to be touched the most, only made the situation all the more intense.
For Zekk, it was taking every shred of self control not to abandon his game and take her. Framed by the white, silken sheets, a sheen of sweat coating her tanned body, the beads catching the sunlight. Strands of red hair were stuck her face, the rest spread out on the pillow beneath her head like waves of fire. Though Taryn was

immobile, he could clearly see her muscles tense and relax, her body quivering and flushed.
Her mouth opened and closed, her stomach and chest quaking as she drew in gasps of air between her gasps of pleasure. Her skin was hot, body twitching at his every touch, and from his vantage point between her legs, he could tell she was very much ready to proceed even further. She was absolutely amazing, and despite his own throbbing need, he wanted to be sure she knew that.
He cupped her very wet and aching center, causing Taryn to emit an almost pained sound as he denied her the ability to rock against his palm. To make it up to her, he applied the faintest of pressure at first, and then a little more. Taryn began to chant his name, her eyes squeezing shut as he increased the pressure and up and down friction with her every gasp.
"Zekk, Zekk, Zekk, stars…Zekk!" Just before she climaxed, Zekk removed his hand, leaving a very helpless and frustrated Taryn staining against the Force bonds that held her. Abandoning any pretense at fighting what he was doing to her, Taryn let out a guttural whimper. "Please, please!"
"Isn't this what you told me to do?" Zekk murmured huskily, resuming his sensual torture of her body, earning another very arousing whimper from his captive. "To run my hands over your body, every amazing inch. To touch you, love you, until you call out my name? What did you tell me? Oh yes, you wanted me to put my fingers in you, like this right?"
"Ughh," Taryn moaned. Her breathing hitched as he pressed one finger inside of her, then another. "Oh Zekk."
He curled both fingers ever so slightly, which caused the tendons of her neck to stand out at the jolt that coursed through her. He bent down to her neck, suckling on her pulse-point. His fingers still working deep in her wet and quivering depths, he knew she was so close to reaching that peak. Could see it in the desperate gleam of her eyes, the way her entire body seemed to coil in anticipation of the release that she so desperately needed. It was only a second later that he pushed her over the edge, releasing his Force hold over her at the same time. In an instant, her taut body arched up, her hands twisting in the sheets as wave after wave of pleasure consumed her. He continued to move his fingers, watching in awe as his younger lover gave herself fully to the sensations coursing through her.
Slowly, he brought her back down from orbit and slid up next to her to embrace her. In turn, Taryn reflexively curled up against him,

something he had learned she preferred doing whenever she experienced a particularly powerful climax.
"That… " Taryn panted, her hands gripping both of his as she spooned herself against him. "Wow."
"Wow?" Zekk murmured, kissing her bare shoulder.
"If I had known that all I had to do to unleash that dark side of you was stun-cuff you to a chair and touch myself, I would have done it earlier," Taryn giggled, rolling over to face him.
"You are definitely evil," Zekk playfully kissed her nose.
"That's me," Taryn pushed on his shoulders until she was straddling his legs. "Okay, my turn now."
"Your turn? We're taking turns now?" Zekk said with a raised eyebrow, enjoying the view immensely. "I think you just like being on top."
"And you don't like me on top?"
"I…never said that," Zekk breath hitched as Taryn gripped his manhood. He wisely decided to shelve any arguments for the time being, knowing that Taryn knew his body as well as he knew her own.
After Zadaria, they had decided not to waste any more time dancing around the other and had fully embraced the physical aspect of their relationship. And once they had started, they found it very hard to stop. They took any moment they could, every moment available, to show their love to one and other. And a week's worth of love-making made them *very* familiar with each other.
Taryn gave him a wicked grin, stroking him back to full hardness. "Though so."
Zekk tried to mentally recite the Jedi Code and several other codeci full of random information. Tried being the operative word. Taryn, gray eyes sparkling as they held his gaze, leaned forward and with deliberate slowness ran her tongue from the base of his length to the very tip.
He exhaled roughly.
Her lips twisted into an impish smile as if she knew exactly what he was thinking.
Which, at the moment, was more or less a string of explicit words describing just how good it felt.
She repeated the process several times, rhythmically squeezing the base of his heated shaft and his sac in time with her tongue. Just when he thought the sensation couldn't become any more intense, she leaned forward and surrounded him with her mouth. Her tongue swirled around the crown, the hot warmth of her mouth making him moan her name. More of his twitching manhood disappeared between her smirking lips, her speed increasing ever so slightly. His hands flew

down to run through her red hair, helping to guide her movements. Taryn's head bobbed up and down, her hands caressing his sac as the pleasure welled up. Already very aroused from bringing her to climax, Zekk didn't last long. Groaning her name one last time, his hips surged upwards, the pleasure causing him to see stars.
Taryn backed off, wiping her mouth with a knowing grin, looking very pleased with herself. "Wow?"
"Wow," Zekk laughed once he caught his breath.
She leaned forward, resting herself against his side. "Love you, you know."
Languidly rubbing her back, he kissed the top of her head. "I do know."
"Always make me feel so safe, so me," Taryn murmured, focusing on his heart beat while one hand idly played with his chest hair. "Trista and I can just be ourselves when we're with you. You have no idea how much of a relief that is for us. Well, maybe you do."
"I love you too," Zekk said softly, unable to imagine a life without her now that she was firmly in his life. "You and your sister have finally given me a place I can call home. A place I look forward to return at the end of every day, a reason to survive every mission."
Taryn tilted her head back and kissed him much more gently this time, her hands caressing his face. "You remember that, Jedi Knight Zekk, okay? No matter how dark this galaxy becomes, remember that my sister and I will be right at your side fighting it with all we have."
Zekk felt a surge of love for the warrior woman in his arms, and rolled them so that she was beneath him. Gazing down at her wide gray eyes, he caressed a cheek with the back of one hand. "And I'll be right there fighting at your side too. I'll be at your side for as long as you want me."
"A very, very, very, *very* long time then," Taryn mumbled, her soul bared to him through her emotion-filled gaze.
Zekk kissed her once more. "A very, very, very, very long time it is then, Lady Zel."
"Make love to me, Jedi Knight Zekk," Taryn whispered tenderly.
"As you wish, Lady Zel."
Their hands intertwined, their bodies joined, and the warrior princess and her Jedi Knight once more made love in the sanctuary of her childhood home.
(^-ll-^)
The fireplace in the chambers of the Queen Mother crackled with dancing orange flames, the only light in a shadow-filled room backlit by the green glow of the Transitory Mists. Though most of the palace had been destroyed, the Queen Mother's chambers had been among the

few areas spared from any destruction. But the room still had no power thanks to the destruction of the power conduits that had ran to it. Not that its two occupants minded.

Passion, when contained and confined for prolonged periods, had a way of consuming everything like an out of control fire when released. Two silhouettes stood in front of the fireplace, a male and a female. Their figures were backlit by the glow of the fire, half shrouded in shadow and half in orange-red light. He was standing behind her, hands moving up and down her powerful body, lovingly caressing every centimeter as they kissed with an intense fervor that mirrored the heat of the dancing flames. The Force connected the two of them on a level rarely anyone saw, their unspoken feelings demonstrated through their actions.

Soft breathing, barely audible over the flickering fire, was the only sound heard. He nuzzled her neck, kissing his way to her shoulder blade, his firm hands possessively cupping her full breasts and rolling the sensitive peaks between his fingers. Her mouth opened in a soundless gasp, head tilting back as she reveled in the sensations her lover was creating. Still nursing their child, her breasts were more tender than usual. Her lone hand reached for one of his, and he gripped it without a word passing between the two of them.

The flames continued to burn brightly, the warm orange light spreading throughout the darkened room and flickering at the very edges of the balcony.

Her hand tightened around his as his free hand moved to her back and gently traced her vertebrae, accompanying each caress with a feather-light kiss. He marveled at the way her shoulder muscles flexed ever so slightly as she arched back into his touch. The small tremors that coursed through her legs and the gooseflesh that rose as he blew onto her heated flesh. It had been far too long since he last had the luxury of loving her, and he was determined to take his time.

For her part, she was in a fiery world of pleasure. Her own eyes were closed tight, breathing labored. She knew where his final destination was and openly welcomed his mastery of her body. As he neared the base of her spine, she released his hand and leaned forward, resting her arm on the mantel and her forehead on her forearm. She felt his hands on the toned cheeks of her ass, his breath on her center, and she shuddered, her eyes fluttering behind her closed eyelids.

After a second that seemed to stretch on for an eternity, he dragged his tongue slowly over her offered center. The sensation sent jolts of undeniable pleasure racing up her spine. Her silhouette arched, proud breasts thrust forward and swaying in response to the sensations

created by his tongue. Sensations that had, until that moment, been only a pleasant memory from many months before.
She twitched as his tongue flicked against her clit, pleasure ebbing as he traced his tongue along her moist folds, then spiking again as it circled the star of her ass. He repeated his journey again and again, tongue to clit, across her dripping opening, to her rear. Her athletic legs shook, her mouth falling open in soundless releases of breath. She rose up onto her toes, his name finally leaving her lips in a gasp, the sensations building from a smoldering ember to a roaring inferno with every pass.
He took his time, minutes ticking by as he feasted, her mind reduced to a puddle of molten pleasure. And when he had had his fill, he deftly added his strong fingers to support the torment his mouth was providing. A wordless cry escaped her, the heat consuming her without mercy.
In and out with deliberate precision.
His agile fingers, slick with her fluids, twisted within her and then withdrew at an agonizingly slow pace, only to push back into her and send flashes of light floating across her vision. In and out. Heated flesh trembling with his every expert touch. She was lost in the sensations, unaware of the passage of time or of anything else but his long fingers moving within her in time with the lashes of his tongue. She kept her eyes close, panting, gasping, the raging fire coursing through her, continuing to build and build with seemingly no end.
And then the inferno erupted, engulfing her entire being in a flash. Her body shuddered and legs shook, every cell in her body feeling as if it was erupting in sheer pleasure. The pleasure went on and on, her lover wringing every ounce of pleasure he could from her. Finally, she sagged, breathless, supported solely by his fingers within her and his arm around her waist.
He slowly kissed his way back up her shaking form, his own arousal evident by the shadow he cast on the wall. His hands gripped her waist to help her stay standing. He nuzzled her neck once more, lips nipping at the exposed column of flesh in silent entreaty. She tilted her head to accept his next kiss, their shadows merging as they sank to their knees onto the animal-skin shag rug in front of the fireplace.
No words were exchanged, her body outlined and glimmering by the glow of the fire. She gripped him and slowly lowered herself down onto him, both releasing breaths of satisfaction at the sensations caused by their physical union.
The heat from the fireplace merely felt warm in comparison, and their passion had yet to fully run its course.

She leaned forward, her hand resting on his chest and her hips moving in a circular motion that caused both to groan and gasp. He gripped her toned rear firmly, aiding her grinding and reveling in the sensations shooting through him. Their eyes met and never shifted focus, both watching the pleasure rise in the irises of the other.
Their actions grew more frantic as the seconds passed, the inferno once again beginning to build. Her shadow emphasized her body's every movement as she intensified her movements, his eyes riveted on his lover on display. Her hand slid over his chest, both his moving to grip it as both felt the inferno fully break free within them. She rode him in earnest, both rational beings giving in to the raw sensations wiping away all logical thought.
The almost agonizingly pleasurable feel of each other's bodies. Of the fur rug beneath them and the fire crackling beside them. The sounds of slick flesh contacting and sliding in the primal act of lovemaking. The cool breeze coming in from the open balcony window. Passion unrestrained, heat raw, lusts unleashed. Gasps and emotion-filled moans joined the sensory overload, their emotions merging with the physical sensations. Both found release at the same time, calling out each other's names in a feral cry.
Then all was silent once more save for the crackling of the fireplace. He held onto her as if she were the most valuable person in the galaxy. She was his childhood friend, the woman with the indomitable spirit, who was secretly his conscience and beacon to all that was right in his life. She was his partner in every sense of the word, the mother of their daughter, the reason why he fought so hard to bring peace to the galaxy. To him, she was as close to perfect as could be.
Just needed to work on her sense of humor a little more.
Tucked against his side, she smiled tiredly and lightly slapped his stomach for his thoughts. As linked as their minds were, it was hard to hide anything from the other, and neither made any effort to do so. For her, he might not have been the carefree boy she had grown to love, but he was still the same person in spirit. His desire for answers, his kind nature, and affection towards all creatures big and small, were his endearing qualities. He was her best friend, the one who showed her how to be more than a stuffy Hapan noble. Who taught her that it was okay to buck tradition, to thumb your nose at the place society tried to make you fill. She loved him, something she'd only ever admit aloud when they were alone together. It wasn't that she was ashamed of it, quite the opposite in fact, but to her, those words were meant for his ears only.
Those words for his ears, and her body for his hands.

Her eyelids fluttered as he began to touch her once more. Her sex, still tender from their earlier coupling, once again began to ache for him. She breathed his name, gripping a fistful of the rug as he circled her clitoris with two fingers. His drew one of her erect nipples into his mouth, his tongue flicking against it while he applied the lightest of pressure with his teeth. Her hips lifted off the rug, a low hiss escaping her. The combined sensation was almost more than enough to bring her to climax once more. He kept her on edge though, but not for long. Rolling her to her side and lifting one of her legs, with intimate familiarity, he entered her once more. She gasped, the feel of his hard length surging back into her triggering her release.

He moaned her name as the slick walls of her womanhood clenched around him, her climax echoing in their bond. Keeping an arm around her, he began to thrust slowly and gently. There was no longer a frenzied need to share themselves with one and other, just a desire to stay connected for as long as possible. Who knew how long they would be a part, how long it would take for them to reconnect again? Such was the pitfall of being responsible for billions of lives. That thought stayed at the backs of their minds as they once again gave themselves to the other. Gave the other the precious few hours the galaxy let them have.

She let her head roll forward, eyes held shut as the heat of the fireplace on her front competed with the heat of her lover behind her. She could feel his strong hands roam over her body, adding to her pleasure. Wantonly, she craned her head back and he was there to meet her lips with a fervent kiss. Again the pleasure built, her mind registering only the feel of her lover in her, holding her, loving her. They rocked back and forth for a while, just keeping up the sensation and reveling in the closeness. Slowly though, as if going from simmer to full boil, the wanton need returned. As if trying to make her succumb from pleasure, his hand reached around leg to her sex and, after several seconds, sent her exhausted body to its peak once more. He was not far behind. A few more thrusts, his essence filled her, her whispered name leaving his lips in an almost pained cry. And then both lovers flopped back on the rug, thoroughly spent.

One of his hands took hold of her one and held it, his gesture communicating whole paragraphs as his eyes gazed kindly upon her flushed and sweat-slickened face. She squeezed his hand in turn, reciprocating the sentiment with an expression reserved only for him. The fire crackled and popped, its roaring warmth dying as it consumed the log within the fireplace. The breeze from the open balcony caused her to shift closer to him, hands still tightly grasped. He wrapped his

free arm around her, running a hand through her hair. Together, their gaze focused on the heavens outside, watching as the first rays of the Hapan sun crested over the distant mountains. No words were said, nor did they need to be.
She was Queen Mother and he Jedi Master, the lives of billions hung on their every decision. But for that brief moment, in the Hapan dawn, they were just two childhood friends taking comfort in the unspoken love they had for one and other.
(^-III-^)
As was the case of all Sith who followed the Rule of Two, the cycle of master being betrayed by apprentice was once again being carried out in the distant void of space. In an asteroid field far from the galactic core, an abandoned mining facility happened to be the setting for this latest betrayal.
"You are a fool," Vergere sighed, shaking her head at her apprentice.
"Am I?" Lumiya chortled, her lightwhip buzzing as it slashed through the air.
"And to think I once thought you held promise," Vergere's green lightsaber sliced through the air and caused a ventilation unit to fall. "You truly have no idea what is about to happen, do you?"
Lumiya' whip sliced the machinery into bits, before she sent the pieces flying across the room. "Of course I do, the rise of a new Sith Empire."
Vergere tisked. "You sad, deluded creature. Did you not listen to anything I've taught you?"
"Oh I have. Why do you think I'm taking this moment to get ahead, *master*. I know the Rule of Two, and if Jacen Solo is to be your protégé, where does that leave me?"
"Considering your failure with his brother, you'd be dead weight," Vergere chirped back. The shadows blended around her and she stepped back into the darkened corridors of the abandoning mining facility. "Although I *was* hoping you'd let Jacen Solo take charge and serve as his liaison to Darth Krayt. But given your short-sighted foolishness, those hopes will go unanswered."
Lumiya sent streams of lightning into the shadows all around her, the purple energy splashing off of the walls and defunct computers in a noisy roar.
"It always amazes me how one can learn so much, yet comprehend so little," Vergere said, appearing behind Lumiya. The dark apprentice lashed out with her saberwhip, but this time Vergere's saber cleaved the top of the weapon in two.
A brutal screech of Force energy sent Vergere flying backwards, her saber tumbling in the opposite direction.

"I've comprehended all I needed to," Lumiya smiled murderously. "Your nonsense about there being a unified Force is unbecoming of a Sith of your status. You're growing senile in your old age."
Vergere dusted herself off, the Fosh looking amused. "See what I mean, apprentice. In all our time together, my apprentice, when have I ever referred to myself as a Sith?"
"Why else did you teach me the things you did? I know dark side when I see it, and those techniques are definitely not Jedi in origin," Lumiya sent out a stream of lightning, but Vergere batted it aside and it blew a hole in a nearby wall.
Vergere shook her head. "I've told you before, a great darkness will soon befall this galaxy. Do you truly think Jedi *or* Sith stand a chance against it?"
"Ah yes, those so called prophecies by races long dead," Lumiya snorted dismissively. "You should probably pick up a sign and start running around declaring the galaxy is ending."
"How else can you explain the actions of the Killiks?"
"Bugs deluded by the absorption of frightened children."
"The growing chaos?"
"Agents of Darth Krayt."
"The destabilization of the mind realm."
"The Mind Walkers probably ate something bad, or caught some disease that killed them off," Lumiya shook her head. "You've been in the shadows for so long, *master*, you're seeing shadows where there are none. Face it, you should have died long ago."
Vergere smiled a toothy grin. "And you're so blinded by your own arrogance that you cannot see the maw waiting to swallow you whole."
Another blast of lightning, and Vergere sent the purple forks crashing against the mag-con field. Lumiya advanced, continuing the barrage of lightning "*I'm* the arrogant one? You truly think you can stop Darth Krayt by hiding out here? That the galaxy is going to end just because of some dusty stories and insane bugs? Instead of hiding, we should be aiding Darth Krayt, growing stronger in his shadow until we eclipse him. We should whole-heartedly be embracing the idea of a Sith Empire reborn, of the changes it would bring about. Do you truly insist on walking this path, master?"
Vergere sighed, her patronizing stare illuminated by the glow of Lumiya's lightning her only response.
Lumiya's face twisted in rage. "So be it, *master*. Like I said in the beginning, I've been planning this for this encounter ever since you made headway with that Solo boy, my replacement. Open fire!"

A flurry of blasterfire filled the hangar, catching Vergere off-guard. An army of battle droids marched out from the various recesses and corridors, their guns blazing. Vergere managed to absorb the first few bolts, but there was no way she could take on hundreds of laserbolts being hurled in her direction. She twitched and spun, the red bolts burning through the Jedi robe she was wearing like a knife through butter.

Vergere continued to gaze at Lumiya, her lips twisted in a smirk that infuriated her apprentice. With a yell, Lumiya lifted Vergere's dying body off the ground and slammed her into the mag-con field. The field sparked purple, and Lumiya kept up the pressure until Vergere was forced through.

"Good bye, Master," Lumiya panted, holding out her hand and summoning Vergere's lightsaber to her. Relief, her master was dead at last.

"You do have a temper, don't you?"

Lumiya spun around, eyes growing wide at the sight of Vergere's Force ghost standing behind her. "Be gone!"

Vergere chuckled pityingly. "You don't know the true power of the Force, Lumiya. And you never will."

"The dark side is all the power I will ever need."

"And that is why you and Krayt will fail," Vergere said, spectral body fading. "Ironically, it's also why the Jedi will fall as well."

Lumiya's jaw clenched. "Be silent, witch, or I will bind you."

Vergere smiled once more and disappeared completely, leaving Lumiya alone on the asteroid she called home.

Spinning to one of the droids, she glared. "Tell Darth Krayt that Vergere has been taken care of. If he wants me to go along with his delusions, he'll leave me Jacen Solo in peace."

"Roger, roger," the droid announced.

"And one of you get me more materials for a lightwhip, I need to make a new one."

(^-IV-^)

Aboard the Yuuzhan Vong Matlok *Burning Heretic*, Tahiri glared down the warriors who were practically twice her size, a hand emphatically slicing through the air. "No, absolutely not!"

"They attacked our homeworld, the sacred *Yuuzhan'tar*. They've even declared their own holy war against us, Avatar of Yun-Shuno." One of hundreds of warriors in the assembly room called out.

"And your answer to that is to release a gene-tailored virus designed to kill off all Bothans?"

"They attacked first. They broke the peace. Now they shall reap the consequences." Another said as if his logic made perfect sense.
"Warmaster Loiric Kaan," Tahiri began slowly, turning to the towering Yuuzhan Vong next to her. "If you unleash that virus on Bothawuii, you'll turn the entire galaxy against you."
"The entire galaxy has done nothing for the Yuuzhan Vong since you came here. They let the hate crimes against our people go unpunished, they let others shame and spit on the name Yuuzhan Vong," Loiric countered. He flexed his clawed hand, one of many modifications he had had the shapers make to his body after his 'promotion' to Warmaster. "They're already against us. But we will show the galaxy how wrong they are to dismiss us."
"Oh for the love of…Has Yun-Rhysode robbed you of your senses? Do you want to drag your people into another war with the rest of the galaxy?" Tahiri snarled. "Because that's what will happen if you do. The Bothans have a pretty high standing in the pecking order of races, the Yuuzhan Vong not so much."
"Blood has been spilt, and that demands that blood be spilt in retribution," one of Loiric's aide voiced, pounding a fist on the table. "We should be out there massacring the Bothans and not sitting here discussing politics!"
"Well someone has to," Tahiri retorted. "I'm *trying* to save the Yuuzhan Vong from further warring. The kind that tore your people apart and brought them to the brink of extinction. You send the plague-ship crashing into Bothawui, and all bets are off."
"We have tens of thousands of warriors with us, more when the rest of the fleet arrives," Loiric said calmly. "They came seeking bloodshed, the death that was denied to them at the end of the war. There is no doubting that the Bothans wronged us, no doubting that the so called galactic government has once again failed to act, tell me Avatar of Yun-Shuno, are we to let those that died go un-avenged? Are we to show the galaxy that the Yuuzhan Vong no longer have teeth and can only gum our way through problems like the Galactic Alliance?"
"Warmaster, you want a war?" Tahiri said, her green eyes shifting to a shade of chlorine ice that Anakin had called her 'Yuuzhan Vong gaze'. She knew that she wouldn't be able to convince the Yuuzhan Vong warriors to stand down, not the generation of Loiric Kaan and those older than him. They were too engrained in their ways, too determined for blood to be spilt. But she couldn't back away either. "You want the glorious battle that you dream about every day? A chance to show the galaxy the Yuuzhan Vong can bite back? A chance for all the old warriors with you to go out in a blaze of glory?"

"The Yun'o demand it."
"Well, rather than an enemy that is few in number, whose military is stretched thin and will provide little sport for your warriors, I have another target in mind," Tahiri baited. "A target whose numbers are in the millions, if not billions. Whose fleets are made up of hundreds of ships, who've already conquered whole planets without the galaxy realizing it. If you want that bloodlust sated, they will provide a much more satisfying challenge."
"What are you saying One-Who-Was-Shaped?" Another warrior asked.
"This enemy is called the Killik," Tahiri padded around the table, her bare feet squishing against the organic mat on the ground. "They have enslaved countless races, annihilated whole fleets without care of their own lives. If one is killed, hundreds more rise up to take its place. In five years, they have fractured the galaxy to a point where it may never recover. Already millions of their kind have been engaged and fought to a stalemate, but a much more massive fleet is scheduled to arrive in the coming months. All available ships are going to the battle front to meet this foe. It will be a battle on par with the Battle of Dac, Coruscant, or Ebaq Nine. The winner will have control of the galaxy. The loser will be enslaved or dead."
The room full of seasoned Yuuzhan Vong warriors was absolutely quiet at Tahiri's description, salivating as they tried to envision such a foe.
"But what of the Bothans?" Grumbled Loiric.
"They'll still be here if the Killiks are defeated," Tahiri answered, doing her best to minimize the 'challenge' the Bothans would present. "But think, Warmaster. If the Yuuzhan Vong fight *for* the galaxy instead of against its peoples, think of how much good will you'll achieve. The Yuuzhan Vong are a formidable race, even after these years of peace, and I know you will all impress if you decide to heed Yun-Yamka's call. One enemy at a time, Loiric. What will satisfy your warriors more, a lopsided fight against a weak enemy that barely controls a few star systems, or a battle to the death against something strong enough to bring the galaxy to its knees?"
More murmuring broke out, a fanatical gleam appearing in the eyes of many in the room.
"Yun-Shuno's vassal is wise indeed," one called out.
"Yun-Yamka has sent the One-Who-Was-Shaped to reveal our true enemy!" Another yelled.
"The Yuuzhan Vong made a pact with the Galactic Alliance, we do not go back on our word," an older, scarred warrior grunted.
Tahiri continued to stand as tall as her petite stature would let her, cold green eyes daring the crowd, the three scars on her forehead

prominent in the dim lighting of the room. "That is true. Now, Warmaster, make the choice and relay it to the rest of the fleet? Who is to be your enemy today? The Bothans and the rest of the galaxy? Or the Killiks, who are capable of toppling both without care?"
Loiric bared sharpened yellow teeth. "You make a fine case, Avatar of Yun-Shuno." He whirled to his audience like the idea had been his all along. "What will it be children of Yun-Yuuzhan? Do we fight a galaxy or do we fight the galaxy slayers?"
Tahiri kept her smile pasted to her face as the crowd roared for the latter.
"So be it! Send a villip to Supreme Commander Saluup Fing. Let him know that of our foe and of the challenge we will give it. First we destroy these Killiks! *Then* we will annihilate the Bothans!"
Tahiri just sighed inwardly. Sometimes she really hated being the Avatar of Yun-Shuno.
(^-V-^)
Jysella Horn's face was stony, her brown eyes deadened. Normally she should be overjoyed at the sight of her homeworld in all its swirling glory. Normally. Staring at Corellia through the cockpit of her X-wing, however, she felt nothing but a numb dread. Her eyes filled with tears that she angrily blinked away. Why did her stupid brother have to go and get himself killed? Worse, he had to go get himself killed and not even leave a body for her to bury.
"*Jysella*," the voice of Mirax Terrik Horn brought her out of her thoughts.
Jysella looked up and saw the *Pulsar Skate* hovering just off her port side. Feeling a heavy, painful lump in the middle of her chest, she keyed the comm. The word she tried to say got caught in her suddenly tight throat. "Mommy."
"*It's okay, Jysella.*"
"No, it isn't," Jysella managed, squeezing her eyes shut. "It isn't okay at all!"
"*Jysella,"* Mirax's voice was gentle, caring. "*Ease off the throttle. Let me tractor you in.*"
Jysella automatically did as she was told, and felt her fighter shudder a moment later as the *Pulsar Skate* pulled it into its cargo bay. The young Jedi just sat motionlessly in her seat the entire way, silent tears now making its way down her cheeks. The fighter shuddered one last time as the docking clamp gripped it, but Jysella remained in the cockpit chair.
"*Sella*," Mirax murmured softly. "*You're home*."

At that, Jysella rested her forehead on the steering column, not bothering to stop the hot tears now. With a choked sobbed, she whimpered. "I'm so sorry, mommy. I couldn't bring Val back. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."
"*There's nothing to be sorry for, Sella. Why don't you climb on out of that cockpit?*"
Jysella irrationally shook her head, as if the canopy bubble was the only thing protecting her from the rest of the galaxy. "I can't."
"*Please*?"
Squeezing her eyes shut, she held her breath and flipped the switch that retracted the canopy. When the mechanical whirring ended, she released her breath and opened her eyes. Awaiting her beside her fighter were both her mom and dad, their expressions a mixture of somber regret and relief.
Stiffly, Jysella climbed out of her cockpit and dropped down to the cargo-bay floor. She avoided eye-contact, her expression alternating been tough and unfeeling automaton, and frightened and devastated little girl; as if she couldn't make up her mind which to be.
Both her parents stepped up and drew her into a hug. Jysella became rigid in their grip, shaking her head again.
"Thank you for coming back to us," Corran whispered softly, kissing the top of her head.
"We love you," Mirax added.
Jysella's legs gave out at that moment, and she began to cry once more. "He's dead, mommy. My big brother's dead."
"I know," Mirax's voice was thick with pain, but she somehow managed to keep herself together. "I know, Sella."
"It hurts," Jysella whimpered, clinging to both parents. "Make that emptiness go away daddy"
"I wish I could, kiddo," Corran said hoarsely, looking every bit his fifty-four years of age. His Force presence was completely closed off, keeping any of his own emotional pain from spilling over to his family. All he could do was continue to hold his wife and daughter and try to be strong for the both of them. "I wish I could."
"Alema's dead too," Jysella sobbed.
"I felt her passing," Corran confirmed tenderly.
"She was never evil," Jysella looked up to her dad, trying to get her point across. "She always meant well. She just wanted to find her place in the galaxy."
"She's one with the Force now, Jysella," Corran said, his eyes closing. "She'll be watching over you along with Valin and my father, and all the other Jedi."

"And Numa," Jysella added with a choked sob. "She'll get to see her sister and master again too."
"That's right," Mirax said soothingly. "They'll still be with us, so long as we keep their memory alive."
"It still hurts though," Jysella pouted in a little girl voice.
"And it will for a long time," Corran sighed softly. The trio sunk to the floor of the *Pulsar Skate*'s cargo bay cuddled together in a group hug. "But life, the galaxy, everything will continue to go on."
"It doesn't seem right though," Jysella protested.
Corran nodded slowly. "I know, I know. When my dad was killed, I raged at the universe for having the gall to continue on after his death. Didn't do me much good. All we can do now is continue forward, as hard as that might be."
Jysella just nodded, clinging to her parents and suddenly feeling very small once more. "I'm sorry I couldn't even bring a body."
"Stop apologizing, Sella," Mirax's voice cracked and she kissed her daughter's forehead. "You came back, and that's all that matters. It's hell losing one kid, no way I even want to think about losing both of you."
The Horn family stayed where they were for a very long time. High orbit above Corellia, floating in the cold void of space in the *Pulsar Skate* with only each other as comfort.
"What's going on on the planet?" Jysella finally asked with a slight sniffle.
"After Natua returned and relayed what had happened, there was a public uproar. Dur Gejjen called a vote of no confidence on Prime Minister Saxan for her handling of the Hapes mess," Mirax said in a subdued voice. "It passed and she was removed from office. Her ex-husband Denjax Teppler is now the leader of the Five Worlds and their allies."
Jysella just nodded at the news, not wanting to lift her head from her mom's shoulder.
"The Corellian Praxeum is also in the middle of it all. We were the ones that gave our blessing for Corellia to intervene in Hapan affairs," Corran continued softly.
"Not Valin, he didn't want us to get involved," Jysella whispered.
"I know, he was always the brains of this family," Corran said with a soft laugh. "We probably should have listened to him. In any case, Minister Gejjen has called an audit into the amount of resources being spent on the Corellian Jedi and has vowed to cut back on governmental support. The Corellian Jedi are no longer invited to parliamentary

sessions or high-level meetings. It's become more of a 'don't call us, we'll call you' status quo for the past two weeks."
"Some good has come out of this though," Mirax continued to rub Jysella's back automatically. "Teppler is taking the Killik threat seriously. Anakin Solo put out an 'everyone with ships send some or we're all screwed' call for help, and Corellia is sending a fleet to assist. This time General Antilles was put in charge."
"Can't he stay retired?" Jysella said with a small laugh.
"That's what Tycho and I asked him," Corran smiled faintly.
"What did he say?"
"That he'd stay retired if the galaxy let him. I actually think the main reason he's going out is because both his daughters will be in the field as well."
Jysella fell silent at that. Though she didn't personally know the Antilles, their reputation preceded them. Myri in particular had been vital in pinpointing Killik-controlled planets in Hapan space, while Syal was already famous for taking out a Pulsar Station. Yet, fame didn't shield anyone from death. She silently prayed that the fate that had befallen Valin would avoid both sisters for a long time.
"I should go help out," Jysella voiced.
"You just came back," Mirax said evenly.
"I'm a Jedi," Jysella said wanly. "Ask dad. It's his fault."
Corran exhaled shakily. "Well, if Wedge is going to make this a family affair, I see no reason why we shouldn't either."
"Dad?"
"Mirax, you think Booster will mind if I drag you and Sella off to another warzone?"
"He'll probably start thinking up even more inventive ways to kill you," Mirax said with a sniffling laugh.
"At least it'll keep that crafty brain of his working. I'll go let the Corellian Praxeum know we're taking time off for family reasons."
"Don't think saving the galaxy counts as a family reason," Mirax bantered back, a small flicker of life returning to her eyes.
"Sure it does," Corran smirked at Jysella, the pain he was feeling still reflected in his eyes. Despite his shields, Jysella could tell that he wanted to be as far away from Corellia as possible. She did too. "Just give us a couple of days to get ready, okay Sella?"
Jysella just smiled sadly and nodded. "It'd be great to have you two along, mom, dad."
"Been a while since we've saved the galaxy," Mirax stood and tugged her daughter and husband up with her. She grimaced and shook out her legs. "We're not as young as we once were, Corran."

"We'll be careful," Corran reassured. "Because I'm not losing either of you if I can help it."
"And we'll look after you too, dad," Jysella said with a wan smile. She felt completely emotionally exhausted. "Now, I'm going to get some sleep. Wake me whenever we get to wherever we have to go."
(^-VI-^)
In the middle of meditation, enjoying the early morning sunlight, Jacen's brown eyes flew open as he felt the distinct feeling of Vergere's death traverse the bond he shared with the Fosh. He didn't know the details, only that her parting from life had not been a voluntary one. The suddenness of it all meant that he could scarcely hide his reaction from his lover seated next to him.
"Jacen?" Tenel Ka's voice was questioning.
"Vergere's dead," Jacen answered.
Tenel Ka remained quiet. He knew that she and Vergere had never seen eye to eye, that Tenel Ka had never trusted the Fosh. Yet out of respect for his own feelings, she had mostly kept those thoughts to herself.
"I don't know how exactly," Jacen murmured. "All I see are some vague images, an asteroid belt, old mining tools. But that could be anywhere."
"What will you do?" Tenel Ka asked, standing and pulling she sheet she wore closer around her body.
"Can't do anything now," Jacen shook his head. "Not like she'll get any better if I rush over to wherever it is she was trying to tell me about. After this Killik mess I'll take Nelani and check it out."
"Whoever was able to kill her had to be very talented," Tenel Ka said carefully.
"I'll be on my guard," Jacen said reassuringly. "Besides, by the time Nelani and I get there they'll probably be long gone. Vergere ended up there for a reason, so maybe she left a message or something."
Tenel Ka looked far from reassured, but she accepted his statement with a neutral nod. Standing, she disappeared back into her quarters to get dressed. Lost in his thoughts for a couple minutes longer, Jacen finally shook his head and got up to follow. Already Vergere's death was compartmentalized in another part of his mind, the more pressing matters taking precedent.
Outside, the sound of construction workers repairing and rebuilding the devastated palace started up. Tenel Ka was already skimming through a plethora of messages that had built up overnight, as well as talking with her super-secretary and bodyguard about Allana's status. For her safety, Jana continued to keep the *chume'da* as far away from the

capital city as possible. Despite the peace, there were still rogue Killik hives that rejected the Royal House's offers, not many, but more than enough to remain a threat. There were also still fanatics that would like nothing more than to end the royal line and install some other individual as leader. Until the security of the palace could be vouched for, Allana would be enjoying the Royal Family's winter retreat by Hapes' northern icecap.

Lomi was still in a coma, safely aboard the *Dragon Queen* where no Killik agent or Hapan plotter could reach her. There was a lot of noise about putting her on trial, but until she woke up there was no telling what type of state of mind she'd be in. After all, she'd been a Joiner for nearly ten years, almost all trace of her original personality would have been wiped out.

"A courier was sent by your brother with a message for you," Tenel Ka voiced as Jacen pulled on his Jedi tunic.

"Really?" Jacen blinked in surprise. He held up a hand and caught the datapad Tenel Ka had flung in his direction. Scrolling through the message, he blinked again. After rereading it, he looked sheepishly up at his lover. "Errr….Tiki. We're going to need to use your fleet again."

"Oh?" Tenel Ka caught the datapad he tossed back in her direction. After a moment, she blinked. "Oh."

"Royal Navy in any condition to go save the galaxy?"

"Why can't you get your own fleet? Why do you always have to borrow mine?" Tenel Ka said dryly.

"I did have my own fleet, but it got blown up"

"Blame Lomi. Besides, you are still paying off the debts you incurred when you blew up my palace."

"Technically that was Lomi also."

"Go bargain with the Killik queens you made nice to. Don't they still have ships?"

"You sound jealous."

"If you prefer giant bug-like creatures with pincers and compound eyes over me, then I'm not jealous, just worried."

"But then I'd have to share her with a bunch of drones, and I'm not the sharing type," Jacen said with a roguish smile.

Tenel Ka just rolled her eyes and folded her arms in front of her. "You just finished getting on the good side of my people. They're even considering allowing you to be my consort."

"Lucky me," Jacen said wryly. "Look, I'll give you…errr…I don't know. You think of something, for the fleet."

"Convince my father and the other nobles to let me go with you," Tenel Ka said, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "If you're saving the galaxy again, Jacen Solo, I better be there too."
"Won't the nobles take it better coming from you?"
"Don't feel like pandering to their needs at the moment," Tenel Ka said with a hint of her Dathomiri rebellious streak. "But you, on the other hand, kept them at bay in my absence. I trust you can get it done."
"Thank you, your trust means everything Queen Mother," Jacen said monotonously.
"Then see to it that it is done," Tenel Ka rejoined in a regal sounding voice that had the both of them smiling inwardly. "I will check on the readiness of Our armed forces and let you know how many ships Hapes can spare. We will warn you, however, that We lost several fleet groups in the fighting, so the number might not be more than Our personal fleet detachment."
"From what the message sounded like, he's taking any and all ships."
"So a typical mission for your family?"
"Overwhelming odds, a galaxy in peril, half-baked plans? Most definitely," Jacen chuckled.
"Do you think our daughter will inherit our ability to get into such reckless situations?"
Jacen closed his eyes, the future image of his daughter all grown up and surrounded by friends and family floating to the forefront of his mind. With a wry smirk, he nodded. "Of that, I have no doubt."
(^-VII-^)
Rejuvenated, filled with a new sense of purpose, General Zekk slid out of the side of the speeder in front of the temporary headquarters for the Hapan military. Once attached to the palace, the original headquarters had a Killik cruiser rammed into it, where it then collapsed along with the tons of debris into the city below. Its replacement while the palace was being repaired was a highly secured tent seated in the shadow of what was left of the palace.
Zekk surveyed the equipment surrounding said tent. It might as well have been a bunker with all the shield generators, anti-eavesdropping equipment, and automated turrets surrounding it. As it was, he had had to park nearly a kilometer away due to plethora of signs warning those approaching about the anti-vehicle minefield that had been planted.
"You Hapans really do take security seriously," Zekk chuckled.
"The Royal Guard took it as a personal insult that the palace was smashed to pieces on their watch," Taryn said with a grin that had practically been pasted to her face since the week began. "We don't

want to be remembered in the future as the generation that got the Queen Mother's palace blown up. I mean, some groups are known for assassination attempts they failed to stop, but no one failed to keep the palace in one piece until now."
"Blame Jacen for that."
"I know, right? We let a man sit on the throne and leave him alone for a couple of months and he blows up our house," Taryn sighed dramatically.
Another speeder pulled up behind them. The driver was Moreem Espara, her passenger, Taryn's sister.
"Hey you guys," Taryn greeted with barely controlled enthusiasm.
Trista raised an eyebrow in imitation of their cousin. "Taryn."
"Oh come on, don't be such a Dug," Taryn shook her head and hugged her sister.
Zekk met Moreem's eyes, and the two shared an amused smirk. "You doing okay, Captain Espara?"
"As well as can be," Moreem exited the speeder with a cane, the gleaming chrome of her robotic leg catching the rays of the sun. "The *Chume* was nice enough to put me on her Special Strategic Command Force."
"Special Strategic Command Force?" Zekk frowned. "I haven't heard of that one before."
"The *Chume* recently formed it," Trista deadpanned. Despite her relatively emotionless exterior, Zekk could sense her gratitude towards her cousin.
"How recent? It sounds like something we could have used on Zadaria."
"When I passed my physical and was allowed to return to active duty recent," Moreem answered with amusement. "The SSCF is designed to work in conjunction with the Royal Guard and Special Operation units to help plan and execute their missions."
"So it's essentially your job to make sure squads like the one Trista and Taryn are in stay alive?" Zekk laughed at Tenel Ka's deviousness.
Moreem shrugged with a smile. "Might not be able to take the field anymore, but I'm fully capable otherwise. In the meantime, General Zekk, take a look at this."
Zekk caught the datapad Moreem chucked at him. "What's this?"
"The new personnel for Alpha squad," Trista answered for her girlfriend. "To replace the six lost on Zadaria."
"Not even going to ask how you know about top-secret personnel changes before me," Taryn said dryly, causing Trista's cheeks to pinken.

Zekk just smiled as he scrolled through the information. He then did a double-take at the information and raised an eyebrow. "You Hapan Royal Guardswomen start young don't you?"
"Huh?" Taryn looked back to her boyfriend.
"Three of these people are younger than you Taryn," Zekk gestured. They continued down the designated path through several security checkpoints. "A sixteen year old and two seventeen year olds."
"Trista and I both started at sixteen, remember," Taryn said. "Of course, we were mostly assigned guard duty, but still. We weren't the only ones. Aros and Lovett also both started at sixteen."
"It's conditioning," Moreem clarified. "Guarding the Royal Family is a big deal so we start half of the guards young, basically groom and condition them to be loyal. Many have been training since they were old enough to walk and talk to be *Chume'doro*. The other half are from elite combat squadrons and are meant to teach the younger guardswomen."
"I know, I know," Taryn rolled her eyes at Zekk's expression. "Doesn't sound ethical. But it's how it's been done on Hapes for a long time, and it's worked. Besides, it's considered the highest honor in Hapes to become part of the *Chume'doro*."
"Fine," Zekk sighed, shaking his head. He looked through the list again. "Moreem, is this Mirala Chell…"
"Related to House Chell of the Heritage Council? Yes." Moreem grimaced at that. "She's the last surviving, non-Killik affected member. The *Chume* ordered me to include her. Two on the list also got on because their families were very influential noble households, House Skela and Luvalle."
"Teens, wealthy elite, political pawns," Zekk narrated in a dry voice "This definitely looks like the new Alpha squad will be interesting."
"One more thing," Moreem seemed to grimace. "Noble house or not, they were all brought up in traditional Hapan households. So you as a man…"
"Meaning they'll treat me like dirt?" Zekk guessed.
"Very, very likely," Moreem nodded.
"Like Taryn said. This is Hapes, it's how it's been done for a long time, and it's how things have worked."
"Not sure how you managed to both support and insult my culture at the same time," Taryn muttered, shaking her head. "Don't worry, just keep being your charming self and you'll win them over."
"*Agreed, General, you'll win them over. At the very least House Roh supports you. Greetings*, *Ladies Zel,*" the voice of Hiana Roh came over Taryn's comlink, causing them all to jump in surprise.

"Lieutenant, providing security detail?" Trista asked evenly, calmly holstering the blaster pistol she had pulled out.
In response the round dot of a laser sight danced across the ground in front of them. The group looked up and saw that the dot was coming from one of the upper spires of the remains of the palace. A second laser dot played tag with the first, and Zekk gazed fondly up at one of the other towers.
"Jedi Knight Ijun, you got roped into the security detail too?"
"*The Chume is here*." The Dathomiri Jedi answered in as few words as possible.
"That explains the added security," Zekk shook his head. "Royal Guard doesn't want to be known as the ones who got the palace destroyed and the Queen Mother assassinated on two different days?"
"Right, because the Queen Mother being assassinated because her palace was destroyed is any better." Moreem rejoined.
"*Good to see you up and about, sir*."
"Thanks Hiana. Are you okay? Heard you took a hit from a rocket after I went down."
"*I'm alive*, *sir,*" Hiana answered. "*House Zel's personal Jedi really does come in handy.*"
The group finished navigating the various security measures and finally made it to the tent.
Taking a seat with several admirals, generals, and high-ranking Royal Guardswomen and one Royal Guardsman, the four exchanged brief greetings with those they knew. Tenel Ka sat at the head of the table, no one dare bothering to approach the seemingly god-like ruler of sixty-three star-systems.
No one but Zekk anyways. "*Chume*. Are you well?"
"Very well, thank you, General Zekk," Tenel Ka answered smoothly. The presence of the others forced them to remain formal, and the use of his rank justified his presence in an all-Hapan meeting. "You are looking…well rested."
Knowing exactly what she meant due to the Force, Zekk felt his cheeks warm. "I have you to thank for that, Queen Mother. For more reasons than one."
Tenel Ka blinked slowly, her face impassive but her Force-presence pleased. "We do try to provide for those who serve us well, General Zekk. Continue to look after the Royal Family and we shall do the same."
His eyes darting to Taryn for a moment, he bowed low to Tenel Ka. "I will endeavor to do so, Queen Mother."

Zekk stepped back, keenly aware that Tenel Ka's current guards were scowling at him for his breach of protocol. After all, one didn't just go up and exchange pleasantries with the Queen Mother, even if you were a general, or Jedi, or someone important. He supposed they should be grateful that he hadn't tried to shake Tenel Ka's hand or hug her, and briefly wondered what would have happened if he had.
Several more officers arrived, filling up the last of the empty seats. With everyone present, Tenel Ka stood.
"First of all, Hapes would like to thank all of you for your hard work in defeating the Killik threat here in the Consortium. But, the war does not stop there. We recently voted to become a greater part of the wider galaxy, and to do so we have taken on additional obligations. A much larger Killik fleet is said to be on approach, and we cannot let them gain a foothold in this galaxy as they did in Hapes."
Recently promoted psy-ops General Rais spoke up. "You're planning on sending the fleet back out?"
"That is correct," Tenel Ka met each of their gazes with serious, slate-gray eyes. "We know that our forces are tired, that these past few months have pushed them to their limits. But we also know that they won't rest until their job is done. If these Killiks are allowed to wreak havoc in this galaxy, then everything our soldiers have fought for will be for naught."
"*Chume*," an admiral spoke up. "No disrespect meant, but can Hapes afford to send any of our ships outside the Consortium? Security is stretched thin already and much of the Consortium thrives because of the protection our Battle Dragons provide. The back-to-back wars, first with the Vong and now with these Killiks, have severely depleted our ability to operate outside our own sphere of influence."
"I…agree, *Chume*," Gadell Vessau, one of Tenel Ka's oldest and most trusted Hapan friends, said reluctantly. "We have sixty-three star-systems to safeguard. The Royal Navy is probably at a third of what it once was under Ta'a Chume. Any reduction of forces available to Hapes will be reductions that will seriously jeopardize the safety of our citizens."
"You're Queen Mother of Hapes, not a defender of the galaxy," a ducha from one of the noble Houses spoke. "You cannot keep abandoning Hapes to pander to the needs of the rest of the galaxy."
"You presume to tell us what to do?" Tenel Ka pinned the ducha with a thousand-volt stare.
"No, *Chume*," the noblewoman said quickly. "Merely advising you."
"Thank you for that advice then," Tenel Ka replied evenly. She gazed back around the table. "Hapes cannot revert back to its old ways just

because the immediate threat to us is over. If you will not approve of the deployment of the Royal Navy in defense of our home galaxy, then we will take our personal guard and go out there on our own."
"The Royal Guard is only ten Battle Dragons strong," protested an admiral.
"Then give me more ships," Tenel Ka said simply. "A stronger galaxy means a stronger Hapes. Or were we just giving lip-service when we promised to stand firm with our new allies?"
Zekk read the faces of each individual in the room. Some were playing the political game, feigning reluctance to garner support from those who were truly reluctant. Others were thinking militarily, trying to balance the needs of the immediate systems with the tactically sound idea of helping out the rest of the galaxy. The Hapans had made a choice earlier in the week, but in the euphoria of the windfall of credits and victory celebration, they had evidently forgot that they had to do their part of the bargain as well.
"We can spare a single fleet group in addition to your Royal Guard," an admiral said after much side-deliberation. "The decision will leave the inner most parts of the Consortium without defense, but hopefully the other fleet groups can pull a ship or two to help out should anything develop."
"Appreciated."
"Which of us will go, Your Majesty?" Duch'da Aleson Gray asked.
"Myself and Jedi Master Solo will lead the fleet," Tenel Ka said. "General Zekk will lead the ground forces, and Major Vessau will supervise the starfighter wings. In my absence, my father and the Dathomiri Jedi will handle any matters here on Hapes."
There were more grumblings, but given her popularity, Tenel Ka's decision eventually won out.
As the meeting ended and people began leaving, Zekk approached Tenel Ka once more. "Back into the frying pan, Tenel Ka?"
Tenel Ka smiled wanly. "Where else would Jacen lead us, my friend?"
(^-VIII-^)
Two Months Later
Jagged did his best not to smirk, smile, or otherwise comment on the mental state of being of his lover standing next to him. They were, after all, on the bridge of his Star Destroyer in the middle of the Chiss Sector Defense Fleet. But Jaina was never very good at hiding her emotions from him, and now was no different. He fully understood the reason for her anxiety. After all, it had been several years since she had last seen her twin in person. Twice that in length since she had seen her younger brother.

He would be the first to admit that her closeness to her own family had caused him to pay more attention to his own. Wyn, Cem, his mother and father, were all recipients of his attempts to maintain closer ties. Yet, while they all had been just a hyperspace jump or two away at most, Jaina had been separated from her family by galaxy-lengths. One could not simply stop by Chiss space on the way to somewhere else. Nor did Jaina have any inclinations to return to the galaxy and renew her role as a pillar of the Jedi Order—so given to her by her uncle. Thanks to a galaxy in peril, however, the Solo siblings were on the verge of being reunited. Something that caused Jaina's brown eyes to continuously sweep the vast expanse of space outside and bounce on the balls of her feet, like a child with her face glued to a window to see the return of a beloved family member after a long absence.
"They are still over a dozen lightyears out," Jagged murmured in a low voice.
Realizing that she had been caught, a light blush filled her cheeks. "I know that."
"If they were traveling at the fastest possible speed, they're still an hour out."
"I know that too," Jaina grouched. "And there's no 'if,' they *better* be traveling at the fastest possible speed if they know what's good for them."
"Can't you feel their approach through the Force?"
"I can feel them through the Force whenever I want. I haven't even had a face-to-face conversation with them since they got back to this galaxy," Jaina got out, abandoning the field of stars for a brief moment to glance at Jagged.
"To be fair, if the HoloNet reports are to be believed, the three of you have been fairly busy."
"That's no excuse," Jaina muttered, her gaze rooted back onto the sparkling field outside. "We're family. I should have made more of an effort to get in touch or something."
"You were on Vagar Praxut for the better part of several months. No HoloNet reception," Jagged reminded.
"Doesn't matter. I'm a Solo, impossible is my specialty," Jaina all but pouted.
"As you say," Jagged laughed inwardly.
"I can sense that you know," Jaina shot him a dirty look.
"Would you relax?" Jagged murmured. "Giving yourself an ulcer is probably not the best way to reunite with your brothers."
"But it's been seven years since I last saw Anakin," Jaina protested. "And he has a family and kids and everything. Seven years! When I last

saw him, he was my reckless, dorky little kid brother. What if he's changed? I mean it's not like he's kept in touch with the rest of us either. What if he's resentful, or serious with no sense of humor, or worse, responsible?"
Jagged raised an eyebrow at the last worry. "You're worried he's become responsible?"
"I'm his big sister," Jaina muttered, looking embarrassed. "I'm supposed to clean up after his messes when he goes rushing off to save the day."
Jagged affectionately looped an arm around Jaina's waist, not caring that they were in full view of the bridge-crew. He was Moff now, and that gave him certain privileges. "He's still your little brother, Jaina. You said it yourself, nothing is going to change that. Just like Wyn will always be my little sister no matter how many times she drives me up the wall."
Jaina just leaned into him, still a nervous wreck, but at least not one about to spontaneously combust. She gripped one of his hands in both her own and whispered softly. "I had no idea how much I missed them until I realized that they were coming to help."
"Well, they'll be here in…"
"Forty-seven minutes, fifty seconds," Jaina muttered,
"Forty-five seconds," Jagged said after a moment.
Jaina elbowed him lightly. "You're making fun of me."
"I would never be so foolish as to anger a Jedi," Jagged said straight-faced.
Jaina just smiled at him and kissed his cheek. "Thanks."
"You are welcome."
"Forty-six minutes," Jaina groaned at the agony of the wait. "Why couldn't they just take the *Falcon* and outstrip all those other ships in the giant fleet of theirs? Heck, why did they even need to slow down and combine fleets in the first place? When I get my hands on…"
"Sir! Sensor contact!" A voice from the bridge pit announced.
"What is it?" Jagged said. Both he and Jaina immediately reverted to their professional personas.
"It can't be the fleet, they're still lightyears out," Jaina frowned.
The sensor operator looked over the readings. "Sirs, sensor profile is reading as a YT-1300 Corellian freighter. Transponder signal says it's… the *Millennium Falcon*."
Jaina's jaw dropped. Jagged couldn't help but smirk. "Please confirm those readings."
"Yes, sir. Readings confirmed, it's the *Millennium Falcon*. Receiving incoming transmission."

"I think Jedi Knight Solo would cause bodily harm to me if I didn't say to put it through," Jagged chuckled.
The holographic images of both Jacen and Anakin appeared.
"*Hiya Jaya,"* Anakin said with a lopsided grin.
"*Been a while, hasn't it?* Jacen added.
Jaina, her eyes filling with tears, could only laugh. "You two are *soooo* dead! What was with that last message, telling me you were with the fleet and had been delayed!"
"*It almost sounds like you missed us*," Anakin said mischievously.
"I'll get my revenge, Little Brother," Jaina laugh-sobbed., shaking a finger at him. With the amount of emotion in her voice, it was clear she missed saying 'Little Brother' almost as much as she missed seeing him.
"*Hey, it was Jace's idea*," Anakin said quickly.
Tears of happiness rolling down her cheeks, Jaina just swatted at his hologram. "And I bet you protested vigorously too."
"*Would it help if I said yes?*"
"Not on your life," Jaina laughed again. "Come aboard my Star Destroyer you two, and make it snappy."
"*See you soon, Jaina*," Jacen laughed in turn. "*It's nice talking to you again.*"
"Yeah, back at you Jacen. You, Anakin and me, we're going to kick some serious bug butt."
(^-Chapter End-^)

act 3

Unknown Regions
-)[-I-](-
Jaina's heart thumped loudly in her chest as the familiar sight of the *Millennium Falcon* coasted into the hangar. She could feel not just her brothers on board but nearly all of her childhood friends as well. Zekk, Tenel Ka, Lowbacca, their greetings through the Force nearly had her dancing with happiness. Tesar and Tekli also added their two bits, and Jaina was sure her face would break with the smile she was wearing. Seven long years since seeing everyone together. Though, she reflected on the Force presences she was sensing, one was missing.
Tahiri? She sent to the others.
On her way, Anakin sent back.
Jaina just grinned, her brown eyes eagerly watching the *Falcon* finish its landing procedures. She was aware of Jagged standing next to her. His expression may have betrayed no emotion, but she could feel how

happy he was for her, and it meant galaxies to have him at her side with the reunion of all her friends.
Unlike most Imperial ceremonies for dignitaries from other governments, Jagged had actually closed off the hanger bay. This meant no lines of Imperial or Chiss troopers waiting to salute the new arrivals. No ranks of officers standing at attention to impress whoever the newcomer would be. It was just her and Jagged and soon to be all her friends. The hanger may have felt a little empty, but she wouldn't have it any other way.
The landing ramp lowered with maddening slowness, Jaina gripping one of her arms to keep herself from running towards the ship. She had to keep some semblance of dignity after all.
First to emerge were her brothers, side by side and smiling with knowing gazes in her direction. They strode casually up to her, like they had been gone for days, not years.
"Hey Jaya," Anakin said lightly, his blue eyes sparkling.
"Little Brother," Jaina put on an annoyed expression as she tilted her head back slightly. "You really had to keep growing?"
"Not my fault you got mom's short genes," Anakin said sheepishly.
"Come here, you," Jaina promptly pulled her younger brother into a tight hug, feeling her eyes fill with tears again. "Force it's good to see you again Anakin."
Anakin hugged her back, his own eyes closing as he struggled to reign in his emotions. Of course he and Jaina were both terrible at that and every Force sensitive in the room could feel what they were feeling.
The other Jedi had emerged from the ship and were now watching the scene with tender expressions on their faces. They had all grown so much since they were last together as a group. They had all met new friends, started new relationships, moved on with their lives. And now they were back together.
Jacen stood off to the side, an arm around Tenel Ka's waist, and she in turn rested her head against his shoulder. Taryn, who had come on the *Falcon* with Zekk and was the only other non-Force sensitive in the room, was holding Zekk's hand and grinning at the scene. Tesar was standing with two of his fellow Wild Knights, and the three Barabel were taking in the scene patiently—their emotions not necessarily running in the same tracks as the others, but understanding the feelings in the Force all the same.
Though not with a significant other, Lowbacca had not emerged from the ship alone. With him were several Dathomiri Jedi fresh out of the Praxeum and entrusted to him by Sanola Ti. Three teenagers in standard Dathomiri leathers stood in a single row behind the towering

Wookie, hands clasped behind their backs and shoulders square. All three teens had different clan markings, with the markings of one of the two females indicating her Singing Mountain origins. The markings on the other two showed they came from Nightclans, albeit two different ones. Sanola Ti and Lowbacca had fought side-by-side in the Consortium in some of the toughest battlefields, and had earned each other's respect. Said Dathomiri Knight was still in Hapes helping Isolder maintain order but wasn't about to let a galactic battle take place without Dathomiri representation.

Next to emerge was the Chadra Fan healer, and Tekli wasn't alone either. She was with her apprentice, the red-haired Josat, who's eyes looked as if they would pop out of their sockets as he stood among a group of Jedi legends. No one his age hadn't heard of the feats of the three Solos, heard how they had killed the Warmaster, Supreme Overlord, and ended the war. It wasn't like he could go back to Ossus and tell all his friends that he got to shake hands with an Imperial Moff and all the other famous Jedi with him. Well, he could, they probably wouldn't believe him.

Jaina finally stepped back from her younger brother, looking slightly self-conscious as her friends grinned at her in understanding. "Hi all."

"Back at you," Zekk chuckled, green eyes sparkling.

"Zekk," Jaina shook her head with an affectionate grin. She saw the red-haired Hapan holding his hand, and read her body-language perfectly. Instead of stepping towards him, she just tilted her head in greeting. "You doing well?"

"Could use a break from all this galaxy saving," Zekk answered, using the Force to convey feelings of friendship in turn.

"Don't we all," Tesar chortled.

"Otherwise I'm okay."

Jaina turned her attention to Lowbacca. "Come here you big fur ball."

"[Fur ball?]" Lowbacca woofed, sweeping Jaina into a crushing hug.

Jaina took it without complaint, though she did grimace slightly and rub her ribs with one hand. The other gestured to the Dathomiri trio. "Your apprentices?"

"[Not quite. I'm more mentor than Master.]"

"Welcome aboard you three," Jaina tilted her head slightly.

"Thank you," the Nightsister replied evenly. Despite being in the presence of *the* Jaina Solo, she didn't appear to be as awed as her companions.

Jaina acknowledged the Nightsister's defiant gaze with a twinkle in her brown eyes. Tenel Ka two-point-oh. "You'll definitely fit in here."

Moving on, Jaina was introduced to the two Barabel females Tesar had brought with him, also the members of his shield-trio, Dordi and Zal. She gave a reassuring pat on the shoulder to a speechless Josat and another hug to Tekli, then finally turned to her twin and the red-haired queen at his side.
"Thanks for chipping in again, Tenel Ka. I can't imagine the political nightmare you must have slogged through to get out here."
"It was not so difficult. For my friends, such nightmares are inconsequential," Tenel Ka stepped forward and initiated her own hug. "Have *you* been well, Jaina?"
"As well as I can be," Jaina answered. "And how's the mother of my niece doing?"
At that Tenel Ka's expression softened. She leaned back into Jacen. "Missing said child terribly at the moment. This cannot be over sooner."
"We'll try to get you back to her as fast as we can," Jaina promised. She focused her gaze on her twin.
"Saving the best for last?" Jacen said lightly.
"You know it," Jaina laughed.
"You're in a very hugging mood today," Jacen commented, stepping back from their quick embrace.
"Blame my boyfriend. He's a Moff now you know."
"My girlfriend is Queen Mother, and she controls more systems." Jacen joked, his enigmatic smile making him resemble his mother.
"Hey, when we're done, I'll have Jagged controlling the entire Empire."
"By then Allana will have the entire Galactic Alliance wrapped around her finger," Jacen countered.
"Geez, leave me with the Jedi Order why don't you," Anakin sighed in exaggeration. "You do know Jedi aren't supposed to become regents? At least that's what Uncle Luke and all the others say."
"Says the living god," Jaina pointed out.
"Avatar of a god," Anakin corrected. "Besides, we Solos make bad Jedi anyways."
"We can blame dad," Jaina agreed. "How is mom and dad anyways?"
"Busy taking care of the political mess we left behind on Denon," Anakin said. "Like I said, we're bad Jedi."
"Speak for yourselves," Jacen said with mock-protest. "I'm the only one of the three of us who's passed the trials and earned the rank of Jedi Master."
"And Senator, Fleet Commander, High Council Member…am I missing any?" Jaina deadpanned.
Jacen just chuckled. "Fine, I'm a bad Jedi too."

"What about you guys?" Jaina looked to their group of friends.
Zekk voluntarily raised his hand. "I guess I should lump myself with you three. Not like I'm any worse off."
"That's the spirit," Jaina winked, sensing much of Zekk's change of heart had to do with the younger woman at his side. "Tenel Ka?"
"I will admit that I have failed more often than not at being a model Jedi," Tenel Ka said evenly. "So I too must 'lump' myself with you Solos."
"This one will also admit to being bad Jedi," Tesar hissed with a toothy grin. "The Wild Knightz are *all* bad Jedi if we were to look back at our first lessonz on what a Jedi should be. Jedi aren't supposed to hunt in packz."
"Don't look at me," Tekli said with wide-eyes. "I just go along with you guys because you're a sure source of employment."
"Tekli," Anakin said chidingly. "I think some of those life-force transfer abilities you developed fall on the Kam-Luke-Corran naughty-list. Not to mention the Yuuzhan Vong techniques you blended with some of those other abilities."
"It's you and Tahiri's fault for teaching me to think outside of the holocrons," Tekli pouted. "Fine, I'm a bad Jedi, but am a bad Jedi under great duress."
"Lowie?" Jaina glanced to her Wookie friend.
"[Peer pressure,]" Lowbacca arfed in amusement. Rested his head in the palms of his giant hands."[I am and always will be a perfectly model Jedi.]"
"Never argue with a Wookie," Jacen said sagely.
"Even when we know better," Jaina finished, eyes shining brightly. She slipped an arm around each of her brothers. "Come on gang, we've got a galaxy to save."
"Should we be so happy the galaxy is in peril?" Zekk stage-whispered to Lowbacca as they exited the hangar.
"[We'd die of boredom if it wasn't,]" Lowbacca replied.
Tekli just laughed. "Force I've missed this."
"I have as well," Tesar agreed.
Taryn, who's head had been jerking back and forth in an attempt to follow the entire conversation, stood next to an equally bemused Jagged at the back of the crowd. "I almost feel sorry for the bugs," Jagged let a rare smile show. "Before this, I had my doubts. But now I have to agree with you. I'd almost forgotten just how powerful they are together."
-)[-II-](-

Powerful or not, even the newly reunited group of friends could overcome a big problem. Despite the fact that they now oversaw one of the greatest gathering of ships since the Yuuzhan Vong War, there was the small fact that the Killik fleet *still* outnumbered their own. Equally problematic was the realization that though they knew the Killiks were coming, they still had no idea *where* the Killiks would go. Would the bugs smash through Chiss space and Join or decimate every living being there? Or would they bypass Chiss space and began a massacre in the Mid-Rim? But combining both problems was the frightening possibility that the Killiks could split their fleet and choose to do both options.

And the Galactic Alliance forces couldn't do a thing about it.

The Killiks still maintained their Force-awareness thanks to Welk and the countless other Force-sensitive species that had been Joined to them. Had absorbed the best military minds of Chiss, Vagaari, Ssi-ruu, and a myriad of other Unknown Region races. While the Killiks were united in thought and purpose, the galaxy's forces were a fragmented token representation of those who could afford to send a ship or two.

"The odds don't look too good," Jaina sighed softly. The holo-table illuminated her brothers in its bluish-white light, the only illumination in the room. The briefing with their friends and military officers had long been over, but the trio had stayed behind to mull over their current situation. "What do you think about Jagged's suggestion at the end of the briefing? Do we split our forces or not?"

"We have to," Anakin murmured. He was leaning back in his chair, head pillowed in his hands and eyes closed. "The Killiks have to know we can't match them even if we keep our fleet together. *I* would split the fleet if I were controlling the Killiks."

"If we split, and the Killiks don't, whatever forces protecting wherever the Killiks come through are going to get slaughtered," Jacen said, rubbing his face and looking at various holographic simulations.

"Then again, if we don't split and the Killiks come through en masse through the hyperspace lanes we *weren't* guarding, there'll be no one defending the planets," Jaina flicked through another simulation.

"The Chiss and Vagaari won't be as effective outside Chiss Space," Anakin added. "If we keep the Chiss-Vagaari-Imperial forces in this region, they'll be fighting for their homes, their families. They know the space here, know its quirks and terrain. We only have a handful of months to prepare, we shouldn't waste it familiarizing them with a new battlefield."

"We identified eight hyperspace lanes the Killiks will most likely enter this galaxy through," Jacen gestured to the hologram. "We can't split

our fleet eight times and expect to hold back whatever the Killiks throw at us. The Hapan and Corellian fleets barely pulled off their victories and we had technological superiority. If these were anyone else, I might agree with you. But the Killiks just don't care if they live or die, will eschew standard or 'expected' tactics. They're a hive mind, they'll stick together."
"We can't gamble with the lives of all those inhabited planets," Anakin protested. "If we guess wrong, that's billions of lives."
Jacen swallowed, feeling like a hypocrite as he advocated to save the lives of those they commanded. "I know. But …we need to make use of the numbers we do have. If I'm right and we split up our forces, the Killiks will crush one-eighth of our available ships and slaughter those people on the planets anyways."
"We still don't know which lane the Killiks will use," Anakin said, opening his eyes. "It takes at least three standard days to get to one from the other. That's giving the bugs a heck of a head start if we guess wrong."
"I can try to have the Vagaari scout ahead," Jaina said. "Leave sensor beacons along those paths. Hopefully it'll give us an advanced warning and time to get our people into position."
Anakin stood and gazed unfocusedly at the holo-images. Eventually, he released a long breath and shook his head. "Every little bit helps. I still think we should split our fleet. Not into eight, but maybe two or three groups. The Killiks infested over three-dozen systems in five years without anyone knowing about it. They actively engaged the Hapans on a dozen worlds with only three fleets. We can't let them gain another foothold in this galaxy. That three or four days our forces will need to catch up is time we can't afford to give the Killiks."
"How would the split work?" Jaina asked.
"Well, you'd get the Imperials, Chiss, and Vagaari," Anakin gestured. "They're familiar with you and Jagged anyways. Jace can take the Corellians, Hapans, and Bothans. I'll handle the GA forces, and the Yuuzhan Vong when they get here. Like this, we should be able to hold off any mass-approach by the Killiks. Jysella Horn brought that report on how Valin held off that Killik fleet in Hapan space, it'll probably come in handy."
"We can talk it over tomorrow," Jaina said. "It's late and you guys took a long trip to get here. Which reminds me, how'd you talk dad into letting you have the *Falcon*?"
Anakin chuckled. "He made it very clear that it was just a loan."
"Uh huh."

"Don't worry Jaina, you can fly her," Anakin said, smiling along with his brother at the hungry gleam in her eyes.
"You sure?"
"You can't crash it, dent it, or otherwise put any more blaster scars on it than it already has."
"Of course, what sort of pilot do you think I am?"
"A Solo," Jacen and Anakin said in unison, surprising one and other but causing them to laugh all the same.
Jaina joined in, shaking her head. "I can only imagine the lecture dad gave you about keeping her safe."
"It has new guns and shields," Anakin said.
Jaina grimaced. "Hope it doesn't draw too much power from the engines. The *Falcon* is a freighter after all, not a warship."
"I looked it over. Didn't feel any slower on the ride here."
"Anakin, you're the droid person. Jacen's the animal person. *I'm* the ship person, let me be the judge of that. Dad might know what he's doing, but the tech's advanced lightyears since his smuggling days. He might have overlooked something."
"Like I said, until we make a decision about whether or not to keep the fleet together, she's yours to pilot."
Jaina smiled tiredly. "Great. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to pull my boyfriend away from the stack of datapads he's no doubt buried himself under in my absence. We'll catch up more tomorrow, yeah?"
Jaina left her two brothers in the room.
"Well," Anakin sighed, shutting down the holoprojector. "That's that."
"We're not going to solve all the problems in one night," Jacen replied.
"It'd be nice if we could," Anakin shrugged. "One less thing to worry about."
"Like we don't have several million more coming this way."
-)[-III-](-
The hour was late, and Anakin Solo was meditating, but not without some difficulty. Like his brother, his mind was also working overtime. But unlike his brother, they centered not on the well-being of his family or of Force philosophies, but on the complex puzzle the Killik situation presented. Flashing through his mind and gone just as fast as a fleet of ships leaping into hyperspace were the various strategies and tactics used in the previous battles with the Killik forces. The main problem was that each and every tactic had been different. Each Killik hive had their own way of attacking, of defending, of entrapping or Reek-rushing enemy forces. Each hive used their Joiners differently and even reacted differently depending on the Joiners they had absorbed. Even with all

the information they had gathered there was still no knowing what the Killiks under Welk were going to do.
There were a few things Anakin was certain of, however.
Fact one: the Killiks were coming en masse. More ships than the defenders could hope to manage. The defenders didn't even know what kind of ships they would be. Would they be more 'Shard' cruisers, ships made up of the spare-parts of countless others? Would they be fully intact spitcrete vessels of Killik design? Would the fighter squadrons be facing suicidal Dartfighters or Joiner-controlled X-wings and TIEs? Anakin didn't know, and had to make contingencies for both cases.
Fact two: the Killiks didn't care about preserving the infrastructure that made up the galaxy. Planets were simply resources to be strip-mined to further the hives' goals. Trade-routes, political centers, they held no value for the bugs. A planet high in natural resources would be occupied and mined until nothing was left, and the bugs would then move on. In either case, any system that fell would further add to the deteriorating state of the galaxy.
Fact three: The Killiks truly believed that what they were doing was right. That the evil they were perpetuating would somehow save the galaxy an even greater grief sometime in the future. For Anakin, that was the most unnerving thing. At least the Yuuzhan Vong weren't under any illusion of 'saving' the galaxy. They were conquerors and they knew it, embraced that identity. The Killiks absorbed any identity they could get their hands on, and with every Joiner became more convinced that their course of action was correct. But when two sides both believed themselves to be right, how would you convince the other otherwise?
Again Anakin was haunted by his failure to save Raynar. Somehow, Raynar's loyalty to the Jedi Code had been twisted by the bugs to further justify the Killik's actions. The logic the Killiks were using just didn't make sense to Anakin, and not being able to understand the Killiks meant that any plan he tried to come up with was doomed to fail. Which was bad considering he was the de facto leader of the Galactic Alliance forces in the region.
Stop thinking so loud Hero Boy.
Hi Tahiri, Anakin deadpanned as much as one could with a thought message. The clarity of her thoughts meant that the Yuuzhan Vong forces she had with her were probably only several dozen lightyears away.
Hi yourself.

Anakin waited for her to 'think' more, but evidently she was content to wait *him* out. *Okay! Sorry.*
*You're thinking so hard you're making **my** head hurt,* Tahiri sent, the image of her rolling her eyes very clear in Anakin's mind. *The bugs outsmarting you?*
Yes, Anakin sent back. Then, realizing it was ridiculous to try and continue a complex conversation over vast distances using the Force, got up from the floor and used his room's holo-comm. A second later, Tahiri's holo-image appeared, the cockpit of the *Veila* in the background.
"Really?" Tahiri blinked in surprise, not expecting such an admission. "They're unpredictable, following no pattern or clear strategy. You can't plan for chaos, even a controlled chaos. And the bad thing is, I think both Jaina and Jacen are expecting me to come up with some miracle plan before this evening's briefing. We're already split on whether or not to divide the fleet. But whether we keep the fleet together or not doesn't matter if we don't have some sort of battle strategy in place."
"So what are you going to do about it?" Tahiri raised a blonde eyebrow. "And thinking yourself in circles isn't going to help, so try something else."
Anakin chuckled, knowing it was pointless to try and shut her out. In their very happy years of marriage, they had always been each other's sounding boards, their Force bond helping them understand each other's intentions and draw on each other's strengths. Whether it was the Force or a stubborn Yuuzhan Vong politician, they had solved any problem they had run into as a team. "I have no idea where I'd be without you, Tahiri."
"Look, I may not be a strategist or someone who knows how to move ships around, but I know about war, and pain, and all that fun stuff Mezhan decided to cram into the old me's head. Part of the Yuuzhan Vong battle strategy was that they were predictable. Why? Because they *wanted* to face an enemy at their strongest. It was no fun for them if their enemies were push-overs. Given what I've seen and read about these Killiks, they sound like the exact opposite of the Yuuzhan Vong. The Killiks have been under our noses for five years now because they didn't want a direct conflict. They tried to get the Corellians and Hapans to kill each other, and the Chiss and Imperials. Denon, they tried to let the Senate's natural instinct of self-preservation tear the galaxy apart. All of their actions speak of a race that wants to avoid tough battles."
"They do have over a thousand ships heading this way," Anakin said.

"Only after we beat back the vanguard they had in place," Tahiri said, reaching up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind an ear. "Even then, the Killiks are sentient just like any other race and at least value their own lives on some level. Why else didn't they just attack the galaxy at the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War? With the numbers they have, they could have easily defeated what was left of our battered fleets and exhausted supplies. Though they and the Yuuzhan Vong might have suicidal tendencies, they won't fight themselves to extinction."
Anakin nodded, accepting the different point of view on the matter. She definitely had a point. After the Heritage Council on Hapes had been neutralized, without their driving force, the Killiks in the Hapan system had all but retreated from the war. "So you're saying that much of what they're doing is psychological?"
"How should I know, I'm not a doctor," Tahiri stuck her tongue out at him. She then shrugged. "I just think that a lot of what the Killiks have done so far mirrors the Yuuzhan Vong. Both their vanguards stirred up trouble, broke down alliances, and had our military fearing what came next. Then, like Domain Vorrik did with the Remnant, they changed their tactics and had everyone and their advisers doubting what they knew. Both the Yuuzhan Vong and Killiks have their infiltrators who have essentially read our strategy books. They know our capabilities while we're only just finding out about theirs. They both rely on fear, force their enemies to react to *their* movements and not the other way around. In both cases, its worked. Take yourself for example, Hero Boy. You're all worked up about their approach that you're letting that pressure get to you."
"Hard not to," Anakin replied, his few words complimenting her paragraphical spew like usual.
Tahiri just smirked and shook her head. "It's easy not to too. If the bugs don't want a battle with your fleets, what *do* they want instead? You're not trying to outsmart the entire bug-mind, just Welk and his delusions."
Anakin thought for a moment, then chuckled, slowly shaking his head. "You really are amazing Tahiri."
"I try," Tahiri grinned. "Can you stop thinking hard now? You could outsmart Welk in your sleep."
"I didn't on Myrkr."
"Dummy, you had just been impaled by an amphistaff, were bleeding out and on the verge of dying. I think that excuses you."
"Okay, fine, fine. Point taken. I'll get some sleep."
"Finally," Tahiri rolled her eyes. "I have a big enough headache as it is from my pain-loving side of the family."

"Loiric being…a pain?"
"He's more like Tsavong than Nas," Tahiri sighed. "Right now I have them pointed at a 'formidable' enemy. But when the Killik threat is over, I have no way to keep them from blasting the Bothans to bits."
"The Bothan government isn't backing us, but we do have a fairly large contingent of Bothan military vessels supporting us," Anakin groaned. "These are the Bothans that think their genocidal war is bad, so it would be very rude of Loiric to fire on them when he runs out of targets."
"Until Supreme Commander Fing gets here, Loiric is in charge," Tahiri grimaced. "And from what I've been able to gather from the warriors with him, they prefer his ideas to the Supreme Commander's. Apart from literally toppling the current Bothan government and hand-delivering its leaders to Loiric, I don't think we can offer them anything that will appease them."
Anakin looked outside his viewport at the starry field. "It might just have to come to that."
"Anakin?"
"The Bothans are no longer part of the Galactic Alliance. We have with us at the moment the 'opposition' leader who has hand-delivered a fleet to us in defiance of her government's wishes. If the current Bothan government won't chip in to help protect the greater galaxy, if they'd rather continue their religiously mandated war against the Yuuzhan Vong, something has to be done. I'll need to talk with Asyr, but it's very likely that the Bothans are going to have a regime change once this Killik mess is over."
"You can't do anything part way can you," Tahiri laughed dryly. "Think Loiric will be able to hold off long enough for me to help the Bothans with a coup?"
"If the mighty Avatar of Yun-Ne'shel commands it," Tahiri replied sarcastically. "The Yuuzhan Vong are all about blood for blood. The Bothans killed important people and assaulted the homeworld, payment in kind is required. Though he probably was looking forward to blowing up a few Bothan ships, his warrior code of honor will force him to accept the alternative you mention."
"Great," Anakin released a sigh and smiled wanly at Tahiri. "Miss you."
"I should be there in another day or two," Tahiri's smile softened. "And I miss you too. You and our kids. Is Cassa and Jayce doing okay? I try to check up on them through the Force but both are still young and…"
"They're okay," Anakin said reassuringly, holding up a hand. "My mom and dad are watching over them. I think Lando and Tendra are also pitching in."

Tahiri let out a small sigh of her own. "Stupid war."
"I know," Anakin scoffed. "Don't worry. We'll get through this and then be a family again, promise."
"We better," Tahiri said mutinously. "Even the *Veila* is protesting the amount of death and killing that's coming up. Says it's not good for our sunny dispositions and makes the 'little people' unhappy."
"See you in a couple of days."
"A couple of days, Hero Boy. And they better be filled with happy thoughts and positive outlooks. Any more heavy thinking and I'll…I'll make you sit through a politics-filled discussion with the Yuuzhan Vong *in* Yuuzhan Vong. I know you know enough of the language to get the gist of things."
"Sure, guttural throat grunt and point means 'take it back or I'll kill you.' And barking with spittle flying means 'take it back or I'll kill your whole Domain.' Oh, and if it sounds like they're clearing their throat, it means they are in agreement."
Tahiri sighed. "Sometimes I wonder why I love you, dummy."
Anakin smiled. "Love you too, Tahiri."
Tahiri grinned and then reached over and ended the communications. Anakin leaned back in his chair, feeling a lot lighter than he had before the conversation. She just had that affect on him. Shutting down his own holo-comm console, Anakin let his eyes close. Tomorrow would bring another slough of adventures, but it didn't seem quite as formidable as it did before.

-)[-IV-](-

Waking up in time to see Jaina turn off the holo-comm, Jagged raised an eyebrow and slid out of bed. Pulling on a pair of sweatpants, he gave Jaina time to gather herself, before approaching her. Jaina didn't say a word, but he could read paragraphs in her troubled expression.
"It is not often you are awake before I am."
"Force call, then holo-call," Jaina breathed, her eyes fluttering shut as he began to lightly massage her shoulders. "Sivan ran into some trouble investigating the assassins."
"It's out of your control, Jaina."
"I know."
"Sivan seemed capable enough when he saved me."
"I know," Jaina repeated. She slowly rotated her head in a circle. "But you'll forgive me if I'm slightly curious about who it is that's trying to kill you. If it wasn't for Turi handing the Imperial Jedi to me I would be out there investigating the thing myself. I mean, Sivan's not even sixteen yet."

"And how old were you when you were fighting warlords, dark Jedi, and all manner of galactic evils?" Jagged said simply.
"*I* am the Sword of the Jedi though," Jaina clenched her jaw. "Not Jedi Secretary or Imperial Jedi Human Resources manager."
"Look at it this way. By overseeing the Imperial Jedi you can now figuratively be in many places at once," Jagged kissed the nape of her neck.
"Not the same."
"Less life-threatening."
"So I should feel relieved I'm sending out teenagers in my place?"
"I'm sure your uncle and the Jedi Masters felt the same about the Myrkr Mission and many others. You survived, so will Sivan and his team."
Jaina pouted mildly. The thing with Jagged was that he didn't waste his emotions, didn't waste his words. He used logic, the same cold emotionless logic that made many wonder how she could love such a man. But he kept her emotionally charged actions tempered, ensured that the target she, the Sword of the Jedi, was aimed at truly deserved her relentless attention.
"It's a shame it's so early. Breakfast won't be served for at least another two hours or so."
Jagged shook his head. "Being Moff affords me special privileges. I can order admirals around. I can meet heads of state without an intermediary. I can treat my girlfriend using government money instead of my own, for ambassadorial reasons of course."
"Of course," Jaina grinned.
"And I can order room service," Jagged deadpanned. He leaned forward and activated the intercom. "This is Moff Jagged Fel, can you send a standard breakfast for two to my quarters? Include the chilled Sposia wine if available."
"It will be done, sir."
"Thank you," Jagged drew back and saw Jaina's wry smirk. "What?"
"Room service? Didn't you have that as Assistant Syndic?"
"It was an unofficial perk then," Jagged said stoically.
"Uh huh," Jaina couldn't hold back her laughter. "So now it's an official one?"
"I'm a Moff now, I'm supposed to display a certain amount of corruption and abuse of power."
"I'm sure systems all over will be protesting your abuse of room service," Jaina gave him a brief kiss that quickly grew into a few more, rising to her feet supported by one of his arms. With a small smile, she affectionately caressed his face. "Are you doing okay, Jag?"
"I am," Jagged said.

"Would you admit it if you weren't?"
"I would not," Jagged answered, the warmth in his eyes saying what the tone of his voice wasn't. "But in this case, things are slowly coming under control."
"Aside from the wayward assassin."
"Hazard of the job," Jagged shrugged. "As leader of several billion people, you're bound to have at least one or two who desire your death."
"Only one or two? Such a positive outlook."
"I said 'at least,' perhaps there may be as many as three or four," Jagged said lightly.
"Great, no problem then," Jaina shook her head in amusement.
"Speaking of problems, you may withdraw your Jedi from the granaries and food-production planets."
"You secured a source of food?"
"Yes," Jagged said. "Not all Moffs are as extreme as Tanal was, as Lecersen is. Jedi Knight Altamik was very helpful in pointing the more reasonable Moffs out to me. Particularly the Moffs of the new territories such as the Albarrio and Cassander sectors, who are eager to stand their ground against the more established Moffs. Moff Westermal of the Prefsbelt sector also has much at stake as his territory neighbors my own and will feel any blowback before the rest of the Empire."
"Look at you, seasoned politician."
"You have been a good influence on me. I didn't even have to park a united fleet in orbit above their capitals this time," Jagged kissed Jaina once more.
"What did you have to give in turn, though?" Jaina frowned.
Jagged tilted his head slightly. "Officially accepting another twenty-million refugees. Most are non-human, though a good deal are humans who disapprove of their government's new pro-Imperial stance. I also had to promise exclusive trade treaties of various Chiss-manufactured goods to several systems. The Chiss have not had trade treaties or outside contracts for several millennia, so I am…making things up as I go along."
"The Chiss can't be happy about losing their monopoly of this corner of space. Won't the separatists gain more ground?"
"At least they will be well-fed separatists and not starving ones. Given time, perhaps they will realize that I am not the tyrannical ruler they fear. I prefer a victory without war after all." The door chime pinged and Jagged moved to answer it.
A young dark-skinned human private, who had probably just been recruited given his age, gaped with wide eyes at the sector's Moff. He

was clad in the black undersuit worn by the stormtrooper detachments of the Empire, but wore the white plastisteel gauntlets, which were currently gripping a cart of food.
"Thank you, private."
"Sorry sir," the private shook himself, quickly pushing the cart into the room. "Enjoy your meal, sir."
"I will," Jagged said politely. "What is your name?"
The young private saluted sharply. "Yaeger, sir. Private Dursem Yaeger, third squad of the One-Oh-Fifth stormtrooper detachment assigned to the *Eternal Dynast* by Moff Lecersen, sir."
"Yaeger, I will remember it," Jagged said evenly, returning the salute. "Carry on."
"Yes, sir." The private saluted and left, the door closing behind him.
Jagged removed the wine bottle from the bucket of ice it had been sitting in and looked at the label. "Good year."
"Hmm? Which one?"
"The year I met you of course," Jagged said mildly, popping the cork and knowing full well that Jaina was blushing as he did so.
"I hate you," Jaina managed, trying to recover.
"A shame," Jagged replied, handing her her glass of wine and topping it off. "Something to start the morning with."
"You really have to stop spoiling me," Jaina sighed, taking a long sip. "You know I'd still love you if we were both ugly cripples living on the streets."
"Again, if I have the power, why not use it to treat the woman I love," Jagged replied evenly, as if the topic was something talked about every day.
"Knew I had an ulterior reason for getting you the job," Jaina laughed softly. She began to dig into the plate of food Jagged set before her. "Any worries about the upcoming battle?"
"Naturally," Jagged said. "But as they are factors beyond my control, I do not fret about it."
"When you brought up that idea the other night, about splitting the fleet, what did you have in mind?" Jaina asked, wondering what another military-minded pilot would think of it. Both her brothers tended to argue with emotion, just like her, which made things convincing, but not tactically sound at times.
"Both splitting or keeping the fleet together have merits and drawbacks," Jagged answered slowly, taking his time to slice apart a pancake. "I am sure you and your brothers have already discussed it ad nauseum, you came to bed rather late last night."
"But your opinion?"

"As soldiers, pilots, the military has sworn an oath to defend those they serve with their life if need be," Jagged said. "It is our duty to try and limit the amount of civilian deaths in the coming attack. That will mean that we must be able to respond fast to any Killik incursion outside of expected hyperspace lanes. Splitting the fleet will give us the best possible avenue to do so."
"Even if we suffer heavy casualties because the bugs come through one location with everything they have?"
"Then perhaps our people will be able to give the civilians of that system enough time to flee," Jagged said, raising his own wine glass in salute. "We know the Killiks already outnumber us by a substantial amount. A direct engagement would destroy our ability to respond to future threats. Keeping our fleet separated will give us the best chance of winning."
"It just depends on who's commanding the fleets," Jaina said. "Valin Horn was able to keep his dozen vessels more or less alive for long periods of time against a much larger Killik fleet."
"I reviewed the reports," Jagged nodded. "The commanders will have to be someone who can adapt quickly and react well when the Killiks suss out whatever strategy they might be trying to use. Most of the admirals sent by the Galactic Alliance are veterans of the Yuuzhan Vong War, but few if any actually have experience in such matters. Unfortunately, the men and women trust those admirals, so replacing them is not an option. It is my hope that these officers will be amiable to Jedi advisors. Just like in the Yuuzhan Vong War, your Battlemeld will be instrumental in coordinating multi-system attacks."
"We have few experienced Jedi as it is," Jaina grimaced. "The Jedi High Council still has most our people bogged down in system-by-system fighting or holding actions. Of the Jedi they sent, three-quarters are apprentices or students from the praxeums."
"One of the drawbacks to splitting the fleet. There is only so many times we can divide it before it becomes a liability and not a boon. But as we have seen in the past, your Jedi Order is not immune to the politics that stymie the greater government."
"You're telling me," Jaina shook her head.
Jagged's comm-link beeped.
"Moff Fel."
"*Sir, the reinforcements from the Galactic Alliance's Outer Rim Security Fleet has just arrived. Admiral Bres-Durron is requesting permission to come aboard."*

Jagged raised an eyebrow and looked to Jaina. "I was under the impression the Outer Rim Security Fleet was tied up securing their sectors."
"I was too." Jaina wiped her hands on the cloth napkin that came with the breakfast and stood.
"Permission granted," Jagged said back into the comm. He reached for his Moff outfit hanging over the bed-side chair. "Jedi Knight Solo and myself will be in the hangar bay shortly."
"I sense….Kyp?!" Jaina blinked in surprise at the new arrivals. "Jedi Master Durron's onboard. And not just him."
"Oh?"
Jaina blinked, sensing the other life-signs. She hastily cleaned her mouth with her napkin and snagged her Jedi overrobe. "He might have just reformed the Dozen. Let's go down there and find out."
-)[-V-](-
Jacen Solo didn't like it when his emotions got in the way of his decision making. But then again, he had never had a family of his own before, never had said family threatened by intergalactic space bugs. It was maddening in many ways, the choice to do what was right or what was best for his family. The fact that the two choices were rarely equivalent only made the decision harder. You couldn't become a galactic figure-head without some sacrifices. But the safety and Tenel Ka and Allana was not one he was willing to make any time soon.
"Are you okay, Jacen?" Tenel Ka asked softly, her lone hand briefly reaching out to touch his. A risk considering the entourage that was following her around.
Jacen forced himself to smile. "I am. It's great being back with Jaina and Anakin and all my old friends again."
"The atmosphere is…most appealing," Tenel Ka agreed, her footsteps clicking through the hallways of the *Dragon Queen*.
Jacen just nodded, keeping his emotions and troubles to himself. As regent of sixty-three very independent star systems, Tenel Ka already had enough on her plate, he didn't need to add to her worries. As if to emphasize the fact, one of the aides walking with her moved to the front of the line.
"*Chume*, the latest reports from the reconstruction efforts back home. It is likely that most of the noble Houses in league with the Heritage Council will take decades to fully recover, if they ever do so. AlGray is almost certainly finished, as its last heir was killed in the Corellian attack."
"AlGray handled the mining and gas industries, correct?" Tenel Ka said evenly.

"Yes, *Chume*."
"Give control of the mining industries House Chemos, House Lovett, and House Avel," Tenel Ka said. "They are smaller Houses but together they should be able to take the burden."
"I'll inform them at once."
"*Chume*," another aide stepped to the front of the crowd. "The latest military figures for the Royal Navy. With the losses from both this and the Yuuzhan Vong War, this is the last time in a while Hapes will be able to respond to outside threats. With the destabilization of the mining and micro-processor sectors, our shipyards are nearly quintupling the time they take to produce a single fighter. House Renald is requesting that the new funds and resources coming in from outside trade be diverted to their shipyards to meet the quotas that were set last year."
"Tell Ducha Thalina Renald that she will simply have to miss the quota this year. We will not allow our people to starve and our cities to become ruinous just to rebuild the navy. Our people are more important than ships and fightercraft."
"As you command*, Chume*."
And so the pattern went on, the gathering of aides behind Tenel Ka stepping forward with one matter or another. Though Isolder was handling day-to-day activities in the Hapan Cluster, as a male, he had no authority to make changes that would affect Hapes on a greater scale. As Tenel Ka handled each petition, request, and complaint with professional calm and patience, Jacen could only admire the way she seemed to take everything in stride. She missed Allana terribly, that he could sense, but her devotion to her people was right up there in her list of priorities. Though aloof and mysterious to many, Jacen could read her so very easily. The sooner she had her people happy, the sooner she could return to Allana's side and be a family again.
"Jedi Master Solo," an aide interrupted Jacen's musings.
Surprised, Jacen raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"
"You have requests from nearly a dozen noble Houses," the aide didn't look up from his datapad as they walked in stride.
"Requests?" Jacen could feel a spike of amusement escape Tenel Ka.
"Yes," the aide nodded. "To be consort."
"Come again?" Jacen said, bewildered as his train of thought became completely derailed.
"Houses Feroni, Ava'on, Muina, and…"
"I don't need to know the names," Jacen held up a hand to halt the aide. "Say that first part again."

"Yes, sir. The Ducha of the aforementioned Houses, as well as a handful of others are requesting that you be their consort, if only long enough to give their Houses an heir." The aide leaned towards Jacen conspiratorially. "If you will allow me to say, sir, some of them are quite fetching."
"You do realize the Queen Mother is standing in front of you and can hear everything you're saying," Jacen said in a mock hushed-whisper.
The aide seemed to pale, his eyes darting to the Queen Mother, then locking onto the datapad. Clearing his throat, he continued. "As I mentioned sir, nearly a dozen Houses have requested you."
"Even if I'm with the Queen Mother and supplied her an heir?"
"She has not claimed you as her consort, nor are you officially the Crown Prince. You were only allowed to rule in her stead because it is what she had decreed and you are the father of the *chume'da*. With her return, that power was revoked and you are now an unattached male who has shown he can govern the Hapan Consortium."
"Good father material then?" Jacen said wryly.
"Yes, sir," the aide replied, missing Jacen's sarcasm completely. "A man whose seed is strong enough to give the *Chume* a daughter, who can hold Hapes together in the *Chume*'s absence is definitely someone with good genes."
Jacen looked over the shorter aide to his lover with an amused quirk of his eyebrows. "Well, given how the Hapan Consortium is the Queen Mother's realm, I will have to ask her permission before deciding one way or another."
"Of course," the aide nodded. He looked to Tenel Ka. "*Chume*, what should I tell the Houses who wish for Jedi Master Solo's seed?"
Jacen grimaced, wondering why Hapans had to be blunt at the most inopportune of times. For her part, Tenel Ka fought to keep her expression neutral, even if she was laughing on the inside. "You will tell them that they will have to find another way to raise their ranking in society."
"With all due respect, you have yet to claim him as your consort," the aide said boldly. "And the *chume'da* was born out of wedlock…"
"Gerander," Tenel Ka said darkly, her good nature evaporating. "You may have served my grandmother loyally and have an innate understanding into Hapan noble politics, which is why We keep you on our staff, but take care not to overstep your bounds."
"Forgive me," Gerander bowed his head. "But I merely speak the truth. You have been wise thus far not to claim Jedi Master Solo as yours, as it allows the possibility of a political union through yourself or through him. But you cannot *not* claim him and at the same time forbid the

other Houses from pursuing him. And claiming him would be a detriment to your throne. Though Hapes is fast approaching a new era with its doors open, the Hapan nobility is still firmly rooted in the past. It was not just the Heritage Council that was wary of new developments."
"He is a Jedi Master and Senator, a leader of his Order," Tenel Ka said evenly. Jacen and Tenel Ka's eyes met as she spoke her next words. "He cannot spend what little time he has free pandering to the needs of Hapes. With his power and influence he can affect the entire galaxy, not just our little pocket of it."
"Then I will tell the noble houses that his duties to the galactic government will keep him from being truly Hapan. Is the reason why you will not claim him because he is an outsider and will never belong on Hapes?"
Eyes still holding each other's gazes, a silent communication was passed between Tenel Ka and Jacen. Her face carved like ice, Tenel Ka inclined her head a fraction. There was no hint of joking now. "That is exactly what you will tell the nobility. Jacen Solo's place is not on Hapes. Will never be on Hapes. He is a Jedi Master, I am a Queen Mother, both our positions will prevent us from claiming each other. He is the father of the *chume'da*, and he was at least competent enough to give Hapes another daughter, securing the line of succession, that is all the nobles need care about."
"As you say," Gerander said, stepping back into the line of aides following the head of the Consortium around.
Neither Tenel Ka nor Jacen looked at one and other after, the bitter truth verbalized, however unintentionally.
Tenel Ka was right, Jacen reflected. He had no place on Hapes despite Tenel Ka and Allana living there. He was a Jedi Master, a Senator, and all the other titles Jaina had quoted to him the other day. Not among those titles were Hapan, Crown Prince, or husband. His home was on Denon or on a star-cruiser, his belongings few. There was no way he could fit on status-filled, materialistic Hapes no matter how hard he tried or wanted to. It wasn't like he could pull an 'Anakin' and selfishly stay on Hapes and ignore the rest of the galaxy. After the Killiks were dealt with, he and Tenel Ka would go their separate ways once more. She to Hapes and he wherever else the galaxy needed him. He would have to watch his daughter grow up in holovids, in the rare time the galaxy would allow him to visit Hapes.
An acrid taste filled his mouth, and Jacen kept his vision rooted to the corridor ahead. Everything he was fighting for, for a family, for peace, for a better future, it would be all things other people would be able to

enjoy. But not him. Never him. As long as his family was happy, it was worth it, right?
An aide at his side asked if he was okay, and Jacen just smiled his warm smile and nodded. "Of course I'm okay. Whether on the galactic level or on a Hapan level, politics are politics. I've learned to live with it. Right *Chume*?"
"Naturally," Tenel Ka replied neutrally, her own gaze rooted to the path before them. Emotional walls stretching galaxies were up between the two of them. They were nearing a split in the corridor. One led to the bridge, the other led to the armory.
"Well, I'll see you later," Jacen said, keeping his voice light. "Zekk wanted me to help out with some demonstration with your Royal Guard."
"And We need to ensure that our fleet is ready for whatever plan Jedi Knight Anakin Solo devises," Tenel Ka tilted her head in permission. And once more, not for the last time, the Jedi Master and Queen Mother went their separate ways.
-)[-VI-](-
Watching Taryn laugh as she helped Imperial Jedi-in-training, thirteen year old Crossbone's Sa'kai back to his feet, Zekk couldn't help but smile in turn. His relationship with Taryn, the place he could call home back on Hapes, it was something he, as an abandoned anger-filled orphaned boy so long ago, would never have thought possible. How Taryn had so effortlessly sneaked through his defenses and become so important to him, he would never know. And he didn't really care either.
Her outgoing nature, her willingness to tackle any problem no matter how mountainous it may seem, her ability to see the bright side in any conflict, they had been so in contrast to his own personality post-Yuuzhan Vong War. But that wasn't who he was any longer. She had showed him the fun side of life, the side that allowed him to stay serious to his duties but live outside of them as well. Despite what she and Trista might say, it was he who owed them such a big debt.
"That was a great job, and you would have had me with that Force stasis, but I have some practice fighting it." Taryn said, flashing Zekk a grin.
Zekk did his best not to blush, to keep his mind on the matter at hand and not to other…matters. In a room full of other Force sensitives, he made sure to keep his relationship with Taryn as low-keyed as possible. Taryn, however, enjoyed their relationship, and it was evident in her every energetic step and the flaming energy in her eyes.

Something that any Force-sensitive, no matter how weak, would be able to pick up on.
As the healer-on-hand should anything go wrong, Tekli pressed her elbow lightly into Zekk's side. "I wonder where she found time to practice resisting that *unique* Force ability."
"Alema and I ran her entire squad through training on Relephon," Zekk said evenly.
"[Relephon was four months ago,]" Lowbacca said with an amused rowl. "[If she hasn't practiced resisting it since then, and was able to fight her way out of it just like that, she truly is a talented warrior indeed.]"
"She is," Zekk acknowledged, chuckling along with his friends. His family.
"I am glad you found happiness," Tekli voiced with a genuine smile.
Zekk nodded. "I am too."
"Alright y'all," Imperial Jedi instructor Alexander Astin looked to those gathered. "As you can see, the Force alone doesn't make a Jedi, light or dark, invincible. Y'all might have seen the reports about the different units encountering Force sensitive Killiks, but the philosophies are the same. If you keep your heads with you, you have a chance, no matter how slim, of winning. Lady Zel, would you care to tell the audience how you bested Sa'kai's Force stasis?"
Taryn addressed the crowd of Royal Guardswomen, which included the newer members of Alpha squad who hadn't trained on Relephon with Alema and Zekk. "A lot of the Force has to do with focus and mental discipline. If you can get into a Jedi's head, he or she will actually be an open book in terms of tactics. Jedi aren't trained to be soldiers, they are trained to be tacticians, and many rely on their abilities a bit too much. Force stasis, as you saw in the previous demonstrations, can immobilize the physically strongest of us all. But I bet what my sisters-in-arms were thinking when under the ability was, 'how do I fight this off' 'how do I get out of it and hurt the one holding me in this,' am I right?"
Taryn received many nods.
"I couldn't even move a muscle," Chiri pouted, playing along for the benefit of the others who might not want to admit weakness in an audience that also had a lot of men present. "How'd you manage it?"
"By making Sa'kai think he's won," Taryn answered.
"It can't be that simple." One of Alpha squad's newer members, a woman in her twenties dressed in the fanciest leather armor her deep-pocketed family could afford, said incredulously.

"Jedi are living people too," Taryn said. "They have their pride in their abilities, their belief that they can accomplish what they've set out to do. Flight Officer Sa'kai, wanna tell them what was going on in my head the split second I shoulder-tackled you?"
Sa'kai smirked, a mischievous smirk crossing his face. "Just related to the exercise, or your experiences the last time someone held you under Force stasis?"
Zekk was surprised to see Taryn blush crimson. He wasn't surprised to see Chiri's head whip to his direction, her jaw dropping. He was *really* surprised when Hiana's head also turned in his direction, re-evaluating him with a calculating stare. *Just great, and I thought I had to only worry about the mind-readers in the room*.
Tekli, Lowbacca, and Tesar all smiled inwardly, their Force signatures letting Zekk know they overheard that thought too.
Why does everyone I know have to be Jedi?
"Errr…just the exercise." Taryn recovered.
"As you command, Sergeant," Sa'kai slipped back into his professional mode. Turning to the audience of adults, a mix of Royal Guardswomen and commandos from other combat units, Sa'kai bowed politely. "What Sergeant Zel was thinking was thoughts of her impending death or humiliation. At the moment she mentioned, she had stopped actively fighting my hold on her and her thoughts turned to that of someone defeated, of someone who was about to embarrass herself in front of her colleagues for not being able to fight off the ability of someone as young as me. Thinking that she had given up, I had loosened my concentration on her long enough for her to coil her legs and throw her entire body at me. Even if I had reapplied the stasis, her entire form's momentum would still have taken me out."
"When you said you loosened your concentration…"
"The more encompassing an ability, the more concentration it takes," Sa'kai answered. "The others continued to fight me, so I knew I had to keep my full effort in keeping them contained. After what seemed like a similar fight from Sergeant Zel, however, I made the mistake of assuming that she had given up."
"And that is often all you'll need to get the better of a Force-sensitive," Alexander took over. "One slip up. One moment of over-confidence. But you can't develop complicated plans to fight a Force sensitive. Everything has to be spur of the moment, reflex, and pray that the Force wants you to live and not the Force-sensitive you're fighting."
"We don't have time today, and we're too few in number anyways," Zekk spoke up. "But once we get a schedule going, we can try to meet

you on a squad-by-squad basis to help get you to the same level the veterans on Lady Zel's squad are at."
"What's next then?" Another commando spoke up.
Zekk gestured to the training room's door, which linked the room to the armory. "Give Jacen a moment. He just got off the turbolift. But he's going to help us in this next demonstration."
"Y'all might want to scoot back a little for this," Alexander recommended, well aware of Hapan attitudes towards males giving directions. "This next segment is to dispel any ideas that fighting fully-trained Force-users will be a cake-wake even with our training."
Jacen entered the room moments later. Zekk could immediately tell that the normally calm Solo had a lot on his mind. It was rare that he could feel anything from the male half of the Solo twins, but even now he could sense snippets of anger, jealousy, and tightly controlled frustration seeping through Jacen's durasteel-hard mental barriers. The feelings seem to spike when Jacen saw the proximity in which Taryn was standing to Zekk.
Concerned, Zekk walked up to Jacen and placed a hand on the younger man's arm. "Jacen, we can reschedule."
"Don't worry about me. Just have to clear my head with some meditation later," Jacen shook his head. "You said you wanted to put on a show for the Queen Mother's guard, to show them what a Force-using assassin might do?"
"Taryn and Trista's idea. They thought it best the entire guard learn what they're up against first hand. So the others don't mistake the training we're giving them as a sure-shot guide to survival."
Zekk saw Jacen take note of the way the audience was now lining the walls of the room. "Let's take it to the hangar bay instead. More room."
"Jacen."
"They want to protect the *Chume and Chume'da*, it's better if we don't hold back."
Zekk saw something flicker in Jacen's eyes. "You're sure?"
"I am. Don't worry, I'm already in hot water for destroying the Royal Palace. I'd be in really deep poodoo if I wrecked the Royal Flagship too. Especially since we're all in it."
"Alright," Zekk exhaled, the tendrils of emotion Jacen had been exuding were tightly locked away once more. He looked back to the audience. "We're changing scenes. Hangar bay people."
The group moved as one, a light and friendly atmosphere existing in absence of everyone else's ignorance of the storm swirling within Jacen. Given that only so many people could fit into the turbolift at one time, the process of getting to the hangar bay took a while. But once

everyone was present, they again lined the walls of the hangar; with even the mechanics and pilots in the hangar joining in the crowd.
The field of stars floated outside the mag-con field on one side and an array of starfighters surrounding them on the other, setting the stage. A hushed silence filled the room as the crowd realized that they were about to witness something first hand that few had seen.
Both Zekk and Jacen were on opposite sides of the hangar, their expressions focused as they tuned out the crowd. They shrugged off their outer Jedi robes, leaving them in the loose cloth tunic most Jedi wore beneath.
"Let's give them a show," Jacen said, voice carrying over to Zekk through the Force. He smiled a smile that held no warmth as he casually unhooked his lightsaber from his belt. He activated his lightsaber and its green blade hummed into existence, turning the pale skin of his face a sickly shade of viridian.
"Yes, lets," Zekk agreed, saber flying into his hand. His tanned skin soon lit up in the warm glow of his red-sheathed blade.
"Restrictions?"
"None," Zekk replied again, sensing that the answer was what Jacen not only wanted, but needed. "They already know the Force has both a light and a dark side. It'll help them see both."
Jacen raised an eyebrow. "Still holding to that belief, Zekk? You of all people should know by now that the Force is one unified whole. You can't have one without the other, it's all part of the Force."
"We can argue about philosophies another time."
"You're right," Jacen took a combat stance, one solely dedicated to fighting other lightsaber users.
"Didn't know you picked that form up," Zekk's defensive stance was clear in the way he held his lightsaber.
"Never had a reason to use it," Jacen shrugged, looking almost like the young teen Zekk had known in another life.
"Let's do this."
Both Jedi suddenly were racing at each other at a pace faster than many could keep track off. At the same time, they leaped into the air, and there was a violent crackle as their sabers met several times. They landed on opposite sides, a lot closer to each other than most of the audience thought possible.
Jacen swung his blade behind him, but Zekk flipped over it and landed so that he was facing the younger Jedi. Both smiling over their blades, they quickly re-engaged. Like daredevil acrobats, they moved back and forth across the hangar-bay at very lethal speeds, arms swinging their blades around in complex patterns that left after-images in the

eyes of many. Hisses, clashes, the sabers slid against one and other. Parry, riposte, twisting block, overhand attack, the two combatants didn't slow down in the slightest.
Those in the audience didn't need the Force to know that one mistake would mean bodily harm for sure.
A spinning kick sent Jacen's lightsaber flying from his hand. An upper-cut and a blow to his wrist sent Zekk's lightsaber clattering to the ground after Jacen's. Both held out their hands again. Lightsabers flew through the air, and this time Jacen's green landed in Zekk's hand and Zekk's red landed in Jacen's.
"With the Force, Jedi are never defenseless," Zekk called out to the crowd. The green of Jacen's blade matching the warmth of his emerald eyes.
"Never assume that any Force-user is unarmed," Jacen added, his brown eyes looking cold and black in the flare of Zekk's red blade. "We don't need a lightsaber to attack. Telekinesis is just one of many tricks in a Force-user's arsenal, some are better at it than most."
Zekk was suddenly lifted into the air with a gesture by Jacen and sent pin-wheeling across the hangar floor. With a burst of Force energy, Zekk stopped his momentum and responded by sending a table flying towards Jacen.
Eyes closed and both hands holding the crimson saber in an upright position in front of him, Jacen caught the table and wrenched it from Zekk's control. Without a word, or moving a muscle, Jacen slowly began spinning the table around until it resembled a spinning fan-blade. Brown-eyes opening and saber lowering, Jacen sent the table rocketing back at Zekk faster than before. Zekk barely managed to bend backwards and slip under the flying projectile, letting it slam noisily into a hangar support beam.
The impact echoed in the completely silent hangar, eyes widened in shock.
"Nice throw," Zekk quipped, glancing at the ruined table and dented pillar.
"Nice duck," Jacen remarked back. He then glanced to the audience. "Most Force users can throw you or their surroundings around at will. Your best bet is to dodge it or try to land as safely as you can. All a Force user needs is time to form a single thought and the Force becomes our ally. Unless you are certain of your success in that split second, don't even try it."
"And we can throw more than one thing at a time depending on how talented we are," Zekk made a gesture and tool boxes and empty

metal canisters rose into the air behind him. "Our surroundings become our allies as well."
Zekk sent the debris flying towards a ready Jacen, who blasted them all out of the air with a powerful pressurized burst of Force energy.
"Ready for the next step?" Jacen said, meeting Zekk's eyes over the glow of the red saber in his hands. His question left no room for what he was asking. After lightsaber fighting and telekinesis, a Force-user's arsenal got progressively darker.
"Why not," Zekk said calmly. He closed his eyes and released a long breath. He then held his free hand out to one side and green lightning began to crackle across his finger-tips. Addressing the audience once more, but keeping his gaze on Jacen, Zekk began to narrate. "Jedi Lightning, a lightside technique meant to disable or stun. Normally cast by a light-side aligned being as an act of desperation."
Jacen stepped forward, red saber now pointed diagonally to the ground at his side. His other hand, however, crackled with purple energy. "Sith Lightning. Meant to cause extreme pain and death. Some of the forces in this fleet experienced Killiks using Sith Lightning to strike down whole squads at a time."
Zekk's eyes narrowed, as did the eyes of Tekli, Tesar and Lowbacca. There was no mistaking the emotions fueling the lightning now crackling around Jacen's hand.
Though he was ready for it, Zekk was still surprised by the sheer strength of the lightning that was thrown in his direction. Zekk hastily held up Jacen's lightsaber and let the green blade absorb the stream of electricity with an angry hiss. His strategy seemed to work at first. But then, as if silently venting a life-time's worth of frustration at once, the electricity intensified until Zekk felt as if he were fighting off an entire lightning storm. He endured it for several long seconds, and then the electricity crackled down the green blade and promptly blew out the circuitry within the saber. But the barrage didn't end. The electricity continued to hiss angrily, sending the destroyed weapon flying out of Zekk's hand.
Only his Force-enhanced reflexes allowed Zekk to catch the one-handed torrent in both his own. There the energy began to pool in a visible ball of blue and white. Zekk exhaled, fighting off panic as the lethal energy continued to swirl and grow. The air snapped and crackled, smelling of ozone and death as invisible gusts of wind caused Zekk's hair and robes to ruffle wildly. Through his Force-distorted view, Zekk looked across the hangar and saw nothing but emotionless concentration in Jacen's face. It didn't look like the attack would stop anytime soon.

Which was bad, because Zekk didn't know how much more he could take.
"Jacen!" Tekli said sharply, the healer's voice rising above the spellbinding display.
As if realizing what was happening, Jacen's cold brown eyes suddenly became wide with horror. He immediately lowered his hand, and the lightning died away. The lightning that had pooled in Zekk's hands continued to spiral for several long seconds. Zekk closed his eyes, slowly drawing the energy into himself and dispelling it harmlessly back into the Force. With the lightning gone, Zekk looked at his hands and saw that both were reddened and blistered. He looked back at Jacen who was looking at his own hands in the light of the red lightsaber blade.
"Lesson over," Alexander Astin took control once more. "We'll meet back in the rec-room fer a quick debrief and description of what y'all just saw. Then I think y'all have your daily duties to perform."
The crowd filed out of the room in stunned silence.
Zekk silently approached a still stunned Jacen, giving a nod to Taryn to go ahead without him. When Zekk finished traversing the hangar bay, the younger Jedi was still staring at his hands, lost in thought.
"Jacen."
"That's never happened before," Jacen breathed. "I'd expect it out of Anakin, Jaina, maybe. But not me."
"You three do share the same parents," Zekk said softly. "That was a heck of a lot of bottled up anger and fear let go at once."
Jacen reflexively deactivated the lightsaber, and the red glow vanished with it. "Guess I fried my saber, huh?"
"It got a little cooked," Zekk accepted his saber back, though grimaced as the blisters on his hands made contact with the cool metal surface.
"Good saber," Jacen said absently, half-heartedly gesturing to Zekk's lightsaber. "Core?"
"Rainbow Gem," Zekk answered. "Taryn supplied the first one, Trista gave me hers a little later when she learned what Taryn did."
Jacen let out a whistle. "Galaxy's most expensive saber then."
Zekk just nodded. "Jace."
"I don't want to talk about it, Zekk."
"Are you ever going to talk about it?"
"No," Jacen shook his head. He turned his distracted gaze back to the field of stars outside the mag-con field. "It's just stuff I need to figure out on my own."
Zekk said nothing, the sounds of the hangar bay returning to business as usual picking up in the absence of their conversation.

"It won't happen again," Jacen said softly, clenching a fist. "I have to go back to the lessons Vergere taught me. By leaving the path she had me on, I've been forgetting what it means to be a Jedi, to truly be a Jedi."
"Your family is on Hapes," Zekk murmured.
"But my place isn't," Jacen countered, not angry or sad, just stating a fact. "My place is wherever the galaxy needs me most. Like yours used to be."
"My family is with you guys," Zekk gestured to Jacen and to where Tesar, Tekli, and Lowbacca were waiting by the turbolift.
"But your place isn't. It's with her," Jacen gestured to the deck above where the Hapan commandos were finishing their introduction to their day's lesson. "We can't always be with the family we choose, no matter how much we want to be. We're Jedi, that takes precedence over everything else. I'm the Conscious of the Jedi after all, it's my duty to make sure the Jedi don't lose their way. Something I haven't been doing the moment I chose to put Tenel Ka above the order."
"Jacen, it's okay to fear for them," Zekk said tenderly.
Jacen looked ruefully at the older Jedi. "Not if those emotions make me forget the lessons I've learned after all these years. I wouldn't be in the state I'm in if I had never agreed to give Tenel Ka an heir, if I followed my brain and not my heart."
"You regret having Allana?" Zekk said incredulously.
"Yes…no…" Jacen shook his head slowly. "It's pointless to regret something that's already in the past."
"Your daughter is still in the present, and the future. Look, Taryn taught me to look at the galaxy a whole new way. Every day is a new adventure, whether you want it to be or not. Just go along with it and you'll enjoy it. Resist it, try to change it, and you'll give yourself a bunch of headaches you could do without. Personally, I prefer her view of things."
"I can't live like that," Jacen shook his head. "If you have the ability to affect what happens the next day, what adventures you'll face, shouldn't you do everything in your power to change it for the better?"
"The better for who? If you're referring to the stunt on Hapes that Lowie and Tesar told me about, then it certainly isn't a better future for those that died."
"And if you had been in my position?" Jacen asked.
"I would have given the Hapan moons a few more craters," Zekk answered evenly.
"Hapes would have remained divided. We wouldn't have been able to send these ships to help out Anakin and Jaina." Jacen iterated.

"You're right," Zekk said mildly. "Hapes and the GA taskforce would have been spared the deaths of hundreds of thousands, the loss of dozens of vessels. Instead of just Tenel Ka's Royal Guard, she would have been able to bring those dozens of vessels, maybe more than one fleet group."
"The nobles would never have gone for it. It's because of the Battle for Hapes that they united around the Royal Family."
"And you don't think a quick and decisive victory would have swayed them? Jacen, you know better than anyone that the future is always in motion. If you want my opinion, you chose the easy option, not the right one."
"I talked to Anakin about it. You know what he said? He said he would have done the same," Jacen gritted out, getting to the heart of the matter.
Zekk paused, his eyes widening in understanding. "And you're more worried about that than the fact that you purposely did what you did?"
"This is what I mean about Allana and Tenel Ka clouding my decisions. On some level, I know that what I did was wrong, that I should have been better than that. I should, but even now, most of me still believes that what I did was best for Hapes. We couldn't afford any more political squabbles, couldn't afford to leave Tenel Ka's opposition with any power-base. Between that and wiping out any House that opposed the throne, I think I chose the lesser of two evils."
"You just said it, it was still an evil," Zekk said, his voice matching Jacen's toneless expression.
Jacen smiled ruefully, rubbing at his chin as he did. "So a small act of evil can't be used for the greater good? I shouldn't have been selfish in my desire to protect my daughter and Tenel Ka from decades of political infighting that was sure to have followed?"
"Jacen, you sacrificed not just thousands of lives, but over a hundred-thousand," Zekk said with concern. "And you call that a *small* act of evil?"
"You didn't answer my question, Zekk."
"Answer mine first," Zekk pressed. "Is what you did a *small* act of evil?"
Jacen's brown eyes hardened. "Compared to what I could have done, yes. Now answer my question. Can such an act be justified if the end result is wholly good?"
"No," Zekk answered just as firmly as Jacen had. "If, in trying to preserve your morals and way of life you use tactics contrary to your beliefs, then what's the point? You let the darkness start to dictate your course of actions for the sake of 'justice' then you're no better than the people you fight."

"We're now back to philosophy, Zekk. The Force isn't just light and dark, neither is life. I've seen too much to believe that 'everything will work out for the better' on its own. If that was true Chewbacca, Anja, Raynar, and many others would still be alive. If the Force is going to be so indiscriminate, then I need to make sure that I have the abilities to look after the people I care for. The Force sure won't. At the same time, if I do that, I don't have the right to call myself a Jedi anymore. And the galaxy needs Jacen Solo, the Jedi Master. Not Jacen Solo, the guy who wants to live an impossible life of peace. You want the point? If the end result is a millennia of peace, would you commit an act of evil so great your name would be feared for that same time span? Would you be the next Palpatine or Exar Kunn just to achieve that peace all Jedi want to instill on the rest of the galaxy?"
"I'm a Jedi."
"I should be one too," Jacen answered. He finally turned away from the field of stars. "Yet, a large part of me says that if in order to achieve the goals set forth by the Jedi Order I have to abandon everything that makes me a Jedi, it's well worth the sacrifice. The Force is not light or dark and you can't bring balance to it by forcing yourself to use only a part of it. I can't be a Jedi and be a father to Allana, be the Crown Prince Tenel Ka would like me to be. I have to choose between the small cluster of systems that is Hapes, and the rest of the trillions suffering in the rest of the galaxy. As a Jedi, Zekk, which would you choose?"
Zekk reached out to place a hand on Jacen's shoulders. "Have you told Tenel Ka this?"
Jacen smiled wryly. "Zekk, you've known her and I for a very long time. When have either of us shared our worries or fears with one and other? Besides, like I said, this is a personal conundrum, I'll figure out the answer eventually."
"Before the battle meld for the fight against the Killiks?"
"Do or do not," Jacen shrugged. "I'll be okay, Zekk. Seriously."
"Just know that I'm here to talk about those pesky Force and Jedi related issues if you need an ear," Zekk said softly.
Jacen nodded once, face betraying nothing, his emotional barriers having remained solid the entire conversation. "Thanks. I guess I should go make a new lightsaber or something."
"I recommend not using Rainbow Gems," Zekk joked lightly. He activated his lightsaber again and gave it a few twirls. "Unless you want everyone else to think you've become a Sith Lord or something."
Jacen's lopsided smile mirrored that of his father's. "And on top of all my other worries I wouldn't want that, would I?"

-)[-VII-](-

"So, we're finally all here," Anakin extended his hands out in welcoming to the heads of the various fleets that was now amassed outside. "We ready for this?"

"Looks like it. Outer Rim Security Fleet awaiting your orders, Director," Kyp Durron, along with Admiral Bres-Durron gave two fingered salutes.

"The Corellians are ready as they will ever be," an aged Admiral Wedge Antilles confirmed. He was flanked by Corran Horn and a stoic Jysella.

"The Independent Bothan Alliance is also up for the fight," Jedi Knight Yaqeel Sa'avetu confirmed.

"The Hapan Royal Guard stand ready," Tenel Ka said, Zekk and a Hapan admiral standing behind her.

"The Galactic Alliance Guard Fleet and allied Alliance Navy vessels all report green lights across the board," Admiral Nek Bwua'tu said. Jedi Master Waxarn Kel's Death Knights Toile Senn and Maika were his Jedi backers.

"We are also ready to slay these galaxy slayers," Warmaster Loiric Kaan quickly said, obviously not wanting to be outdone by the two Bothan leaders. Sitting next to the bulky warrior, Tahiri just sent Anakin an ever-suffering sigh. The rest of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet had been delayed by their aging ships, so Loiric was still in charge of the Yuuzhan Vong forces that *had* arrived."They will fall before the might of the Yuuzhan Vong."

"The Chiss and forces of the Third Empire stand ready," Assistant Syndic Hess'irolia'nuruodo said professionally. With her was Imperial Admiral Vitor Riege and Imperial Moff Jagged Fel.

"As do the forces of the Vagaari Empire," Elansh said in turn, sitting next to Ariarsh. The Chiss Jedi Antaria Wellos and Imperial Jedi Antalia Draco stood behind them like a protective angels.

"The Jedi Coalition is also ready," Jacen said, tilting his head at his brother.

"As are the Imperial Jedi," Jaina added.

The rest of the fleet leaders of smaller governments chimed in, Corporate Sector, Adumari Union, what was left of the Hutt fleet, and a dozen others. Anakin had put out a call for ships and got himself a good sized flotilla that would have looked impressive if it still wasn't going up against a force several times its own size.

"I'm going to keep this short and simple," Anakin began. "All our engagements with the Killiks thus far have been us reacting to them. Us trying to adapt to their strategies and tech. We can't win a war fighting on the defensive. The Killiks are coming to attack this galaxy.

If we stay in the hyperspace lanes and wait for them to come, we'll still be fighting on the defensive whether we split our fleet or not."
"You want to attack the Killiks?" Irolia said, a note of doubt in her voice.
"I'm not sure if you had a chance to take a look," Admiral Bres-Durron, tucking a strand of red-hair behind an ear. said. "But the Outer Rim Security Fleet isn't exactly equipped for a suicide mission. Our antiquated capital ships won't last long in a straight up fight."
"That's where *we* come in." Loiric thumped his chest confidently.
"No suicide mission, no direct attacks," Anakin shook his head, deflating the Yuuzhan Vong commander. "It's high time we force the Killiks to react to *us*."
"How are we going to do that?" Another admiral asked.
"Jacen," Anakin looked to his brother. "You helped to negotiate that truce with the Killiks in the Hapes Cluster right, you're familiar with how their hive mind works? Still have Lomi onboard the *Dragon Queen*?"
"Fairly, and yes."
"And we still have a large number of identified Joiners in this galaxy, all coincidentally enough near Jedi keeping a watch on at-risk systems."
"Just get to the point, Anakin," Jaina sighed.
"A two part plan using the entire Jedi Order and the forces we have at our disposal," Anakin activated the holo-projector. "I know all of you are by now tired of seeing these same hyperspace routes and the odds of the Killik fleet taking any one of them, or even more than one. What if I told you we could narrow the Killik's approach down to two passages with near hundred-percent certainty."
"Go ahead," Jagged said evenly.
"Step one, we have all the Jedi begin sending messages into the Joiners nearest them. Every single Jedi from students, apprentices, knights, masters, all of them. They'll send subtle hints, misleading information, sudden revelations, planets in this Outer Rim sector that would be prime targets to hit. Everything all at once, galaxy wide, from as soon as we can implement it, every day until the Killiks come. Jacen, Zekk, and any Jedi adept at mind-influencing here will work directly with Lomi to learn how Welk thinks and focus on sending their message into dark space to directly influence Welk's courses of action. We don't really care what the Killiks want or do, the only thing that matters is the direction they go."
There was a moment of silence as those unfamiliar with Jedi abilities blinked in confusion and those that were aware of what a Jedi could do digested what Anakin was telling them. Eyes seemed to widen as

comprehension dawned on the latter group as they fully understood what Anakin was getting at.
"You're basically trying to set up the biggest mind-trick the galaxy's ever seen," Corran Horn said with disbelief. "Every single Jedi, all at once, trying to influence…"
"A galaxy-wide bug mind," Anakin finished. "I know. However big it is, it's still only one mind though. Thank Tahiri for pointing that out for me, while you're at it. One is a heck of a lot easier to think about that billions. All we have to do is trick that one mind."
"And trick them to do what?" Admiral Bwua'tu asked.
"To believing they have us on the ropes, have us desperate, and have completely befuddled our abilities to predict where they'll go next."
"Aren't they already doing that?" Admiral Bres-Durron said dryly.
"That's where the trick comes in," Anakin said. "We make the Killiks believe that the biggest concentration of our ships will be in these sectors. All will be far away from the 'target rich' planets the meld will make the bugs salivate for. From a bug perspective, why go through the effort of decimating your hive against the enemy navy if you don't have to."
"The Murgo Choke?" Admiral Reige spoke up, seeing the hyperspace lane Anakin had highlighted.
"Many populated and mineral-rich worlds lie on it, including the uninhabited planets in the Utegetu Nebula that Admiral Bres-Durron uncovered when her team took out that Pulsar Station two years back. All things considering, it's a bug paradise."
"And there are only two routes that go into it," Jaina tracked Anakin's logic. "Once in those routes, they're the only way in or out of this galaxy."
"Exactly," Anakin smiled. "I propose setting up two beach-heads. One in the Ilum system, the other in the Geroon system, with the Utegetu Nebula as our fall-back point. We have, what, four months or so before the Killiks get here, so that should be more than enough time to fortify these systems."
"And the fact that the Galactic Alliance is familiar with Ilum and the Vagaari and Chiss are familiar with Geroon doesn't factor in at all?" Irolia asked with raised blue eyebrows.
"They factor in. I figured we'd all fight better for territory we're familiar with," Anakin answered "We'll do the exact splitting of the forces later today, but I wanted to get a read on what you all of think of this strategy. It's insane, relies on, what Jedi Master Horn said, the biggest mind-trick ever attempted, but I think it has a good chance of working. The only downside is that unless we successfully convince the hive-

mind to act a certain way, we'd be flying blind. Jacen and Zekk have a good chance at succeeding with the Killiks in this region of space because of their innate ability to commune with other living creatures and the Joiner aspect of it. The other Jedi across the galaxy not so much. The more distant the connection to the hive-mind, the harder it will be to implant our suggestions. It's why we need *all* Jedi for this. It's going to have to be one heck of a mind-trick."
One by one, the admirals and other naval leaders gave their consent for the plan to go ahead. They might not know about the Force, but they could definitely understand the logic involved. The Jedi in the room likewise gave their consent, with Tenel Ka, Jacen, and Jaina all voicing their support.
"Great," Anakin met each of their eyes as they gave their answer. "Then let's get started. We have a galaxy to defend."
-)[-Chapter End-](-

Denon
-)[-I-](-
For the most part, Luke Skywalker loved his nephews and niece, cringed at the idea that it was now their generation's turn to defend the galaxy, and bemoaned the loss of their childhood and ability to have a stable family. There were times, however, when he wished they weren't quite so successful in the whole 'defending the galaxy' role they seemed to have picked up naturally.
Luke couldn't help but wonder if the Solo kids knew just what type of political firestorm they had kicked off. And, in an unusual twist, for once it was politics not directly connected to the senate. Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin might not have known it, but their actions—spearheading a massive fleet to safe-guard the galaxy—had actually made it *harder* for the Jedi to separate themselves from the rest of the government.
"*And if elected to the Chief of State, I promise to use the full resources of the Jedi Order, not restricted by bureaucratic red-tape. We're all seeing the good that can come of letting Jedi take control of key institutions such as the aid groups and military division. Imagine what good can come with a Jedi as leader of this government.*" Kenth Hamner's voice filled the apartment over the HoloNet. "*Leia Organa-Solo and my other esteemed opponents wish for the Jedi to withdraw from the government. But I ask you this, if they did, how is the galaxy to survive? Even as we speak Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin Solo are leading fleets to protect us all. Jedi such as Kyle Katarn and Jaden Korr are defending key worlds against alien incursion. While other senators succumb to corruption and greed, Jedi Senator Jacen Solo has*

steadfastly attempted to push through bills to bring order back to this galaxy."

With the Bakuran Hegemony seceding shortly after Anakin had taken the joint taskforce to the Unknown Regions, the Hapan Consortium in disarray from the Killik intervention, the Tion Hegemony a pale shadow of its former self, and the Imperial Remnant showing shades of its namesake, it was a wonder that the galaxy was still in one piece. Bakura's secession meant that Cal Omas was all but finished as a politician, but he still had several months to go before the elections. During which time the Jedi Order strained to support the weakening central government. Even if Anakin did win in the reaches of deep space, there might not be a government left standing when he returned.

"What type of Jedi Order will you grow up in, Janek?" Luke asked softly, starring across the apartment to the room where his youngest son slept.

The door to the apartment whooshed open silently, and Mara Jade Skywalker entered with a tired expression on her face.

"It's a no go, huh?" Luke guessed, drawing his wife to him.

Mara rested her forehead against Luke's with a groan. "Tresina Lobi and Octa Ramis both think that supporting Kenth Hamner's run is the best thing for the Jedi Order. Barratk'l is on the fence, but said the Jedi can't very well step down with so much weight resting on us at the moment. Though they all agree that Jedi and politics don't mix, they're also in agreement that that is what it is right now. 'This is a new Jedi Order' Tresina said, 'One where Jedi and politics must walk hand-in-hand even if it's never been like this in the past'."

"What about the other members of the council?"

"Kyle's backing you, surprisingly. I think his particular set of life-experiences make him smarter in that regard. Kam also has your back. But, to be honest Farm Boy, the rest of the Jedi Order is pretty much split into one of two camps. I didn't think I'd see the day, but they've stopped quibbling about Force philosophies and started arguing about politics. How about you? How was your meeting with the non-Jedi council members?"

"Much like how yours went. Hamner and Lobi seemed to have convinced most of the ministers that more Jedi involvement in the government would help get things done," Luke sighed, shaking his head. "I don't know. Maybe it was a mistake leaving the Order on its own for so long. They're straying so much from what Obi-Wan and Yoda taught me, acting so differently than the orders of the past that

it's hard to tell if they're just calling themselves 'Jedi' because of the prestige the name carries and not because that is who they are."
"I'm sure more than a few masters of the past order would be crying themselves to sleep at the sight," Mara drawled. "But stop frowning so much, we're at that age where the wrinkles on our face don't disappear overnight."
"We're at the age where we're supposed to be enjoying the fruits of our labors," Luke said dryly. "Not laboring more because of the fruits of our labors."
"You're not going to try and convince Hamner and the others to stop their path, are you?" Mara said intuitively.
Luke shook his head. "It's not my place."
"You're the Grandmaster," Mara reminded.
"At the moment there are two Jedi Orders, thanks in small part to both my inattention to the Order, and also to those nephews and niece of ours. I'm only Grandmaster of the half that wants to listen to my counsel. To the other half I'm the founder of an Order that needs a breath of fresh air. Breath they believe they're giving it. The downside is, I can't just sit back and say I'll let them learn from their mistakes and see the error of their ways. Not when their path is currently trying to prop up the galactic government and give everyone hope. I can only hope they realize the Jedi Order in any incarnation just isn't equipped to support a galaxy by itself."
"What's Leia have to say about all this? I know she's still running on her 'reduction of Jedi presence in the galaxy' platform, but I haven't had a chance to talk to her. She's always seems to be in a meeting these days."
"From what I can tell, she's laying the groundwork for when Hamner and the others finally *do* realize the Jedi Order can't do everything on its own. She didn't tell me the specifics but I know for a fact that several sectors are behind her initiatives, even the ones who stand to lose money from it."
"Looks like she hasn't lost her touch one bit, I wonder what she promised them."
"Me too," Luke chuckled.
"So what are you going to do about our Jedi Order?" Mara asked, the two standing. She draped her arms over his shoulders. "We can't let it self-destruct. But we can't support what they're doing either."
"And with the Killiks still threatening, we can't call another conclave," Luke acknowledged. "Although I do have one idea, I don't think you'll like it."
"Try me," Mara gave him a soft kiss. "I've got your back, Farm Boy."

"I'll step down as Grandmaster," Luke said in a voice barely above a whisper.
Mara raised a copper eyebrow. "Oh?"
"A leader can't lead if half of the people he or she is leading doesn't want to listen. I *have* neglected the Order, and it's clear that my ideal of a Jedi doesn't match what most of the others think. I can't force my way of thinking onto them."
"So you're giving up?"
"No," Luke shook his head, shifting to stand behind Mara. "After the war with the Killiks is over, I'm thinking about putting the Grandmaster position up for election among the Jedi. The timing should be right too. The Galactic Alliance will be voting on their leader in four months time, so a new Grandmaster should take over for the next era this galaxy is heading into."
"Who do you think will be up for the task?"
"I've had a talk with Saba Sebatyne," Luke said. "And she expressed interest in taking over in my stead. She has the support of Yavin, Dathomiri, and Ossus praxeums so she'll definitely be a frontrunner."
"Is that all?"
Luke smiled wryly at his wife. "You'll really hate the next option."
"Huh?"
"Kenth Hamner happened to be in the room when I brought up the topic with Saba..."
"You're kidding!" Mara said in disbelief. "If he gets elected for both positions, there's no way the Jedi Order can stay separate from the GA."
"I know," Luke said sardonically. "It will truly be a test of the Jedi Order's will. An all-or-nothing moment. Do we stay with the traditional route and slowly remove ourselves from the government, or go full throttle and become a branch of the government, the personal arm of the Chief of State. You can imagine that I will do everything in my power to help Saba get my position."
"You better. So, Sebatyne and Hamner, anyone else?"
"Katarn expressed interest when he heard Hamner would be in the running," Luke laughed. "It shows how much he hates that idea if he's willing to get even more political."
"Heck, I'd put myself up if it came to it," Mara laughed along with him. "Okay, enough politics, how have our kids been?"
"Like angels," Luke said softly, smiling whimsically. "They're really taking this well. Ben had ten years of us, Janek had seven, and now they have to share us with the rest of the galaxy."
"I can only sense Janek here."

"Ben's at the Denon Temple, wanted to hang out with others his age."
"Oh?"
"Also, Kani's there too."
"Ah, that explains everything." Mara said with a smug grin.
"Watching those two, it's like watching a combination of Anakin and Tahiri mixed with Jaina and Zekk," Luke shook his head ruefully.
"They're going to be amazing if given the chance."
"Your Jedi intuition or a father's intuition?"
"A little bit of both," Luke admitted, the two heading for the bedroom.
"I'm just glad Ben has friends he can surround himself with to insulate him from the rest of the galaxy. I can only imagine how hard it must be for he and Janek to carry my family name."
"Both our kids are tough. No matter what happens to the Jedi Order, they'll endure and live. Just like we have."
-)[-II-](-
"Thank you all for coming," former Ambassador Leia Organa Solo greeted everyone at the table as the morning Denon light flooded the room. In a restaurant that had been reserved for just the occasion, the dozen people were the only ones in the spacious room.
"One normally does not refuse breakfast with someone of your esteemed reputation," Justice Minister Ta'laa Ranth said courteously.
"I will admit that I was somewhat surprised by the invitation." Senator Riyo Chuchi of the Outer Rim Relief Committee said politely. "As you know, this is my last term and I will be stepping down in several months."
"That's still several months away, Senator Chuchi," Leia smiled enigmatically. "Much can be done in that time."
"True," Riyo matched Leia's smile with one of her own. "But I had hoped that my last few months would be drama free."
"Sorry about that," Leia chuckled. She then gestured to the woman at her right, and looked to the others. "Senators you are familiar with former Senator Pooja Naberrie, of Naboo?"
Senator Charr of Corellia smiled warmly. "I am familiar with her work. I still remember the HoloNet announcement, Ms. Naberrie, when you talked down that nest of pirates from attacking your planet's supply convoys and convinced them to protect the convoys instead. Many in CorSec are envious of your reputation at reaching non-violent solutions to situations that only seem to have violent ones."
"Everyone has a reason for doing something, Senator," the tall, brown-haired woman said evenly. "It is only a matter of finding out what they want, and showing them there is an alternative way of achieving their goals."

"That is definitely something I agree with." The elderly Japrael Sector senator, Lux Bonteri, noted calmly. He gestured around the room, sunlight glinting off his silver hair. "And from the people invited today, I can tell that that is probably the main reason we are all here. To find an alternative way of helping the Jedi Order recede from the forefront of the government."
"Indeed," Leia said. She gestured for everyone to sit. "Because of the importance of this, I won't dance around the issue or mince words. I am fully aware that my chance of being elected to the Chief of State position are growing dimmer with every victory the Jedi Order is scoring against the Killik forces. What I want to do, however, is to give the galaxy something to think about. I want them to *think* about the Jedi Order not as a group of mystical problem solvers, but as regular living beings. In the Yuuzhan Vong my son had the galaxy rally behind the Order and elevated Jedi to almost divine status in their eyes because that is what the Jedi Order needed to be at that time. Unfortunately some in the Jedi Order began to believe that line, and the rest of the galaxy never stopped believing in it."
"To many in the galaxy, the Jedi represent their only hope," the Corporate Sector's representative, Viceprex Vinya Maysor said. "Many businesses and corporations rely on the stability just the name 'Jedi' brings. In fact, we even have convoys whose insurance rates are halved if traveling through areas of space safe-guarded by Jedi-advised fleets."
"Exactly," Ta'laa Ranth said. "The Jedi are renown as uncorruptable, us senators not so much. It'd be like dangling a new speeder in front of someone and then having them choose a junker."
"And we need to change that image," Leia said knowingly.
"How? With Kenth Hamner a shoe-in to win the Chief of State position and your children in charge of a massive fleet to save the galaxy, we can't exactly say things will be better with someone else at the helm," Duros Admiral of the Galactic Alliance's Second Fleet, Tarla Limpan asked.
"I'm not saying the change will happen today, this month, or even this year," Leia continued politely. "It will be slow, gradually, but it has to start now. This will give your corporations, Viceprex Maysor, time to build up contingency plans. Will give the Outer Rim, Senator Chuchi, time to build up their own security forces so we can phase out Galactic Alliance and Jedi patrols. And, Minister Ranth, it will give us time to nominate or encourage senators we think are noble enough to take center stage in this galactic government. True that the senate has a reputation of being a corrupt place where favors are traded in

backroom deals, but it will be our job to shine the light on the few senators who stand out from the rest. To reward good behavior so to speak. If public sentiment gets behind these senators and the decisions they make, the battle in the senate will become that much easier."
"And how does the military fit in?" Admiral Limpan asked. "I know you've already had similar talks with Admirals Maken and Cheb. Both seem to be under the impression that they'll become the next supreme commander if they back what you're doing."
"The hardest part of this plan will be to phase out the Jedi support in the fleets," Leia said softly. "You know it to be true, Admiral. Your fleet leaders and wing-commanders are becoming too reliant on Jedi advice and strategies. In the past two years alone, nearly every major military victory was spearheaded by a Jedi-led fleet."
"With good reason," Limpan said. "The Jedi are sound strategists and can sense and feel dangers us non-Jedi leaders can. We'd be remiss not to use the tools that are available to us."
"Besides," Lux cleared his throat. "If the Jedi aren't commanding fleets and working closely with the military to secure this galaxy, just what will they be doing?"
"Going back to the root of who they are," Leia said. "In past times, Jedi were meant to be negotiators, peace-keepers in the most basic of senses. They'd be diplomats, healers. If the Jedi wish to stay in the military, they should sign up the old fashion way, and work their way to the top. In the Yuuzhan Vong War they had to change that identity to warrior and soldier to survive, but they are no longer under a direct threat. In fact, the only threat they face at the moment is from within. In a way, we'd be helping the Jedi Order reclaim their identity and saving the Galactic Alliance at the same time. There have been many brilliant minds in the military that aren't Jedi, Akbar, Bel Iblis, even Thrawn and Tarkin. But if we let the Jedi Order do our thinking, then we'll never be able to have our own heroes to laud."
"Then…what do you need the Second Fleet for?" Admiral Limpan frowned as best a Duros could frown.
"The Second Fleet, Makin's Third, and Cheb's Fifth, they all form the backbone of the Core and Inner Rim defenses," Leia said. "Incidentally enough, they also have the greatest amount of Jedi embedded in their forces. Just as I asked Cheb and Makin, I'll ask you to start releasing these Jedi from their roles. It doesn't have to be immediate, but from the biggest capital ships to the ground forces, try to cut back the number of Jedi in your fleet by at least a quarter before the election next year."

One of the other senators spoke up. "You've talked a lot about how this will benefit the Jedi Order and the Galaxy, Princess Solo, but not about how *we* will benefit from backing these plans."
"Senator G'Sil," Leia smiled politely. "Your part in helping to form the Galactic Alliance Guard has no doubt made you many friends in both the industrial and military sectors. Yet, Coruscant still remains a work-in-progress."
"Funds are being used to repair Vong-formed worlds that can be immediately inhabited," Coruscant Sector Senator G'vli G'sil said sourly. "I doubt even you'd have the power, or the will to siphon away credits from these 'noble' endeavors."
"Who said I had to?" Leia raised an eyebrow. She looked to the Sullestan at the other side of the table. "Finance Minister Luewet Wuul, how much money is being spent to support the myriad of Jedi with the fleets?"
The Sullestan blinked for a moment, pulled out a datapad, then looked up. "Depending on the year, an average of three to five billion credits to support and maintain Jedi forces in the field. This year alone, seven billion credits have been spent, but mostly due to the war against the Killik forces."
"Seven billion! What was that spent on?" An incredulous senator from the Tapani sector blurted. "You could build several starships for that kind of money!"
Luewet addressed the question. "The Jedi Order currently has twelve squadrons of Jedi starfighters spread throughout the fleet and a handful of support staff for those fighters. They also have seven capital-ships being maintained on Galactic Alliance payroll. In addition, they have close to a hundred and fifty Jedi on the ground in heavy combat or conflict-high zones. Most of the credits spent do support joint Jedi-GA forces, so if subtracted, will still bring an annual total of close to a billion credits in expenditures."
Leia inclined her head. "Thank you, minister. So you can see, Senator G'sil. If the Jedi are pulled back from the front, there will be more credits available. I think it will be a symbolic act on your part if you are able to get the credits your sector sorely needs. If you become the main individual involved in relocating the capitol of the Galactic Alliance back to Coruscant."
"We gradually reduce funding for the Order at the same time the military phases them out," another senator noted.
"It is ironic," Riyu Chuchi said slowly. "That the Jedi Order would sacrifice its funding to allow a ravaged world another chance at life."

"I'm sure many other arrangements can be made," Leia said, looking to the others at the table. "But the food is getting cold, so let us eat first, and then we can go back to the finer details."

-)[-III-](-

"We are getting too old for this," Talon Karrde said wryly to the others, his voice barely heard over the cantina's rousing music. Not that he'd be recognizable in his wide-brimmed hat and trench-coat with its collar pulled up. "At this stage in life I wanted to settle down and write my memoirs. All those seedy details I've learned over time finally out there. Most of the secrets I learned are about people who are long dead now anyways."

"You'd give away information for free?" Booster Terrik snorted in disbelief, similarly disguised as a down-on-his-luck spacer.

"Just the out of date material," Karrde shrugged. "I'd probably make more money on book-sales than the information is actually worth."

"That's more like you," Booster chuckled.

"I agree with you, Karrde. I thought I was done with this cloak-and-dagger stuff a long time ago," Lando Calrissian spoke up, nursing a drink. He was in civilian dress, but looked more like a refugee than the CEO of a high-profile tech company. "I'm a legitimate businessman now. Just being connected to the two of you will put a dent in my profits."

"That hurts Calrissian," Karrde deadpanned.

Lando just smiled winningly. "You're the one drinking my hundred-credit a shot liquor, Karrde. Shows I don't completely mind being seen in your company."

"And it looks like the man who summoned us is finally here," Booster gestured with his head towards the door of the cantina. "And of course he brought a friend."

"Two friends," Lando said with raised eyebrows.

"Galactic Alliance Intelligence," Karrde sighed, and glared balefully at the middle figure. "And *he*'s supposed to be the respectable one."

"You're late," Lando remarked as Han took a seat.

"Gave the *Falcon* to my kid," Han grumbled. "Had to rely on this guy's ride. Slowest thing in the military, I swear."

"Intel isn't supposed to stand out," Garik 'Face' Loran said mildly.

"But a cargo-ship?" Han said, rubbing his back. "And the blasted seats weren't even broken in yet."

"We had to travel cheaply," Kel Tainer mimed holding a finger to his lips. "Officially we aren't here."

"Gentlemen," Garik acknowledged.

"Garik Loran, Kel Tainer," Talon said in turn. "What did we do to warrant the honor of both your illustrious presences?"
Kel pointed to the man at his side. "He's retiring to spend more time with his family."
Lando blinked and tilted his head curiously. "He was caught in some money-embezzling scheme or had an affair with a Senator's daughter? I didn't hear about it."
"Neither did I," Booster said. "Then again, he's GA Intel. If he wanted it quiet, he'd just silence everyone who knew."
"It's worse," Kel said, to his former commander's forever-exasperated chagrin. "He actually started a family and decided to be a responsible parent. Not like me. That's why he's leaving me in charge of Wraith squadron."
"Our condolences," Talon said to Kel. He then tilted his head toward Garik. "And congratulations. I heard you and Dia adopted."
"Adra Passik," Garik smiled goofily "Eight years old and already smarter than the both of us were at her age."
"I assume you didn't call us out here so we could celebrate Garik and mourn for Kel," Booster said gruffly.
"No," Han said. "But I am going to call in all the favors you all owe me. And then rack up a few more of them myself."
"I'm not giving you my ship again," Booster said quickly. "You got it shot up the last time."
"And I don't have a fleet anymore," Karrde voiced. "I turned it over to Shada."
"Tenandro Industries is already doing our part for the GA so I can't see how I can help you there," Lando said.
Han looked to Garik and Kel. "Told you they're legitimate now."
"Okay, so let's speak hypothetically," Garik clapped his hands together and glanced at the bottle of liquor in front of Karrde. He looked at it with a mournful expression. "Sorry, gave up that stuff. Didn't realize I'd miss the feeling."
"You've drank this before?"
"Special op raided their bottling facility," Garik said with a chuckle. "Can't tell you more though, classified."
"Of course," Lando chuckled. "Please continue with your hypothetical situation."
"Hypothetically, if a group of smugglers…" Booster cleared his throat, and Garik amended his statement. "Former smugglers and information brokers…. with political connections in nearly every reach of this galaxy decided to use their influence to…influence more legitimate political decisions, how hard would that be?"

"Hypothetically," Karrde said slowly, stirring his stir stick in a martini glass. "It would depend on the political decision and how many credits we had available. It also depends on how reputable you want those former law-breakers to stay. Though, that group of former law-breakers wouldn't be able to do something as great as say, influence a Chief of State election. But policy might be doable."
"Said former law-breakers would also have to benefit some way," Booster said shrewdly. "Time is money, and they probably would be more generous with their efforts if a large pile of credits felt as strongly about the issue as they did."
"Exclusive contracts to help rebuild Coruscant," Kel Tainer spoke calmly, raising more than one pair of eyebrows.
"You could promise that?" Karrde asked.
"Hypothetically, if the former smugglers and information brokers were to sign up, that could be one of many ways they'd benefit," Garik confirmed, his poker-face up.
"So what would they have to do?" Lando said slowly.
"Make dirty senators look really dirty and the ones that try to stay above board stay that way," Han answered. "The people need senators they believe in. Leaders they can count on outside of the Jedi. A Senate that can actually pass bills that will help them out, and not stall because of partisan bickering and outside 'donations'."
Lando raised a hand. "How will having former law-breakers support these 'above-board' senators help with their image?"
"By buying off the guys who want to buy them off? Appealing to their consciences?" Kel offered. "These former law-breakers would have to use their imagination. In terms of credits, consider the entire GA intel budget at their disposal."
"A blank check?" Talon whistled.
"Put it this way," Garik said. "If the government falls apart, all those credits won't be worth a thing."
"True."
"This would be a long-term assignment," Garik said seriously, abandoning any pretenses. "And there probably won't be an end-date any time in our life time. This is us trying to save the government we all fought hard to make. Signing up is voluntary but strongly encouraged."
Lando poured himself another hundred-credit shot of liquor and took a moment to let the alcohol burn its way down his throat. With a resigned exhale, he set the glass back on the table. "We're legitimate now, I guess we have to help out. I've got to clear it with my better half, but consider Tenandro Industries at your disposal."

Karrde nodded slowly. "I guess my memoirs and the story on Jabba's love-life can wait. I'll let Shada know she's not entirely in charge just yet."
Booster was silent, his gaze rooted to a flashing set of strobe-lights in the distance. Finally he exhaled. "Jedi CorSec will never let me live it down if I did something selfless."
"You'll be getting well-paid," Kel reminded. "It's a business decision."
"I'll just tell him that," Booster grumbled. He then eyed the two Wraith squadron operatives suspiciously. "You sure my ship won't get shot up this time?"
"Hopefully no shooting will be involved."
Booster breathed deeply. "Then I'm in."
Kel handed each of them a datapad. "The accounts you can use. More will be added if you need."
Each took a card with uncharacteristic solemnness, as if understanding the burden they would soon be bearing. Just as they were about to switch to lighter topics, an argument broke out in the opposite side of the cantina. The band continued to play unabated even as two large groups of thugs squared off, each yelling insults that made the band only play louder.
With wry looks, Han, Karrde, Lando, Booster, Garik, and Kel calmly finished their drinks and then turned their tables over and sat behind them. They all pulled out blasters of various makes, some as old as their storied careers.
Seconds later, punches and people were flying. Amazingly, the band continued to play, even as other patrons in the cantina were caught up in the growing fight. Blasters were brought into play, though the inebriated and drunken states of their users meant the walls suffered more casualties than the other patrons.
"We did choose to meet in the rear-end of civilized space," Han remarked, eyes tracking a bottle as it flew over their makeshift cover and shattered against the wall.
One of the patrons tried to peek over the table and received a jaw-full of fist courtesy of Kel Tainer's solid hand.
"Now this is more like it," Booster chuckled, grabbing another guy from over the table and knocking him out with a blow. "Cloak and dagger stuff is so boring."
"The door's clear," Garik gestured.
"Do we have to leave?" Kel called out, bashing another thug with a chair.

"Yes, party's over," Garik sighed. He pulled out a thermal detonator and activated it. The whine as it charged up, familiar to the low-lifes in the room, brought everyone to a halt. "Show's over, go home."
Eying Garik with fear, the group quickly scurried out of the enclosed space of the cantina, the fight ending just as quickly as it began. There were, however, quite a few patrons still on the ground, either dead, injured, or passed out. Chairs were broken, tables were overturned, and light-fixtures were shot out.
Han, taking in the carnage, shot a pitying glance to the barkeep and flipped him a credit chit on the way out. "Sorry about the mess."
"N…no….no problem," the barkeep squeaked. "We're quite used to it. Third fight today."
Han followed the others out into the street.
"Well, Solo, Loran, good doing business with you," Booster grumbled. "Have to go move my Star Destroyer before what passes as local authorities try to ticket and impound it."
"Likewise, Booster," Garik said lightly.
"See you around the galaxy, Han," Lando said with a parting wave. "Thanks for stopping by."
"When did we start putting in effort to save this galaxy," Talon shook his head in disbelief. "As business ventures go, it isn't exactly the most profitable or pleasurable."
"Makes living a lot easier," Kel said.
"For others, though." Talon pointed out. "We are the ones that have to keep running around making life easier for all those poor saps who take it for granted."
"You could have always refused," Han said.
"Nah, I like a challenge," Talon's eyes glimmered. "Been a while since something worthwhile came up."
"Good luck," Han said.
"You too, Han. Hope your kids are as good as the media makes them out to be."
"I do too," Han said dryly. "But after this, if we all do our jobs, then they won't have to step up again for a long time."
Talon donned a wide-brimmed hat and tipped it. "Don't get too optimistic there, Solo. You know better."
Han grimaced. "Unfortunately I do. You didn't have to say it out loud though."
Talon just nodded. "Being realistic is what's kept me alive so far when all my other competitors have bit the dust. Optimism has never won wars after all."
-)[-IV-](-

"You can't possibly be considering running for both Chief of State *and* the Grandmaster position."
Kenth Hamner glanced mildly at the shorter Luke Skywalker at his side. The Denon sunlight shone on them as they walked through a busy street-way clad in customary Jedi attire. "And why not? A centralization of power is what is needed if we are to cut through the bureaucracy that has crippled this government. If I am elected to both positions I can guarantee the Jedi Order's relevance to this galaxy for many years to come. I know you don't see eye-to-eye with me regarding the future of the Order, but this is for the best."
"The Jedi Order is straining to keep up with the demand placed on it as it is," Luke said patiently. "If even more burdens are placed on it…"
"If I'm Chief of State I can make sure the Jedi in the field have the support they deserve," Kenth countered. "As it is, every Jedi deployment is bound by those regulations that came out of the Tion Civil War fiasco."
"This isn't the Jedi way."
"What? Using all of our capabilities to protect the galaxy?"
"Using our capabilities to dictate how the galaxy should be run."
"Master Skywalker, at the core of everything, a Jedi is supposed to help protect the weak and defenseless. Supposed to keep the galaxy from falling into darkness. How can we do that if the Jedi Order has no say in the politics that run the galaxy? How are we supposed to be expected to give our lives to a galaxy run by corrupt politicians and greed-motivated individuals? If Jedi run the galaxy, we'd end many of the problems that plague the Galactic Alliance."
"And in doing so create many more." Luke replied. "When the Jedi Code and politics clash, which take precedence?"
"Whatever is right for the galaxy at that time," Kenth answered. "Surely you've seen by now that the Jedi Code can't be the answer to all the problems that arise. We as Jedi have to transcend the restrictions the code creates if we are to fulfill its mandates."
"There are less than a thousand Jedi," Luke argued. "How can you expect so few in number to regulate a galaxy of trillions? We're already stretched thin with just this war against the Killiks. But if multiple threats arise we'd never be able to cope."
"Which is where the legislation I am trying to pass will come in. It will give the Jedi officer commissions in the armed forces and enable them to take control of the fleet groups, much like the Solos are doing today. A military leader with the precognitive Force abilities will be able to end threats as rapidly as they appear. If it weren't for the Senate bogging everyone down with their pointless debates, the Killik situation

would never have gotten as bad as it is now. Believe me, Master Skywalker, a Jedi take-over of the Senate will be good in the long run. And I'm not the only Jedi who feels that way."
"I know," Luke said with a tired, regretful nod. "I can only hope your good intentions produce positive results. The galaxy can scarcely afford another weak administration after these last few years. If the majority of the Jedi Order believe as you do, then that is the path the Jedi Order will take. I only ask that you remember the Orders of old and the tradition our Order is founded upon. Never in the history of the Republic, in the Jedi Order, has there been a Jedi Chief of State. Never has the Jedi become so involved in the politics and running of this galactic government. Every time a Jedi Order has come even close, the government and by extension the Order, collapsed."
"That won't be the case with this Order, Master Skywalker. You'll see. The Jedi Order and the Galactic Alliance will become even stronger than before should I be elected. Now, debating my decision to run, or enjoying the sunlight isn't the reason why you called me out here, is it?"
"No," Luke's blue eyes shone dully in the morning light. "But it does have to do with politics."
"This day and age, what doesn't?"
"I understand that the Mandalorians have balked at using their new ships to supplement Jedi Order taskforces?"
"That's correct. Their new Mandalore doesn't want his people to be associated with the Jedi Order in any way. The Mandalorians have actually withdrawn to their sector and abandoned the routes they had said they would protect."
"It's not like them to go back on their word, much less an established contract," Luke said, his tone letting Hamner know he knew more than he was saying. Though a former member of the Jedi High Council, Hamner still had many political connections.
"Their contract was unreasonable," Kenth said dismissively. "For the money we were paying them, we could build an entirely new fleet group. Plus, why should we pay a bunch of mercenaries something that anyone with a conscience would do for much less."
"But who's going to fly those ships? You? Basic training takes at least half a year, getting the crews up to par against the seasoned pirates out there even more," Luke said. "The Mandalorians are a highly-trained force that have proven that they can keep their corner of space as stable as the Bakurans or Corellians. And they do so with a military force a fraction of the size. We can't *not* afford to accept their help, no matter the cost."

"That's another fact you and I differ upon, Master Skywalker. Where you see the Mandalorians as allies, I see them as leaches, no better than the pirates they hunt. While the government bleeds credits, they're among the first that would attach themselves to an artery and choke out the rest of the body. That contract was an example of the excesses of the Omas administration. His Restoration Initiative is another. How many credits has the government lost on restoration projects that have dragged on well past their expected completion date?"
"You aren't in front of the holocamera right now," Luke said. "And what would you have Cal do? Abandon those projects and the billions of people who rely on them, rely on the hope that their homeworld will one day be livable again?"
"Projects that suck away billions of credits from others nearing completion, yes," Kenth answered. "Once those planets get up and running, *then* we can focus on the parts that need extra help. But like the Jedi Order today, the Galactic Alliance funds are spread too thinly."
"Well, in the process of 'saving money, perhaps you should listen to a report Jedi Knight Doran Sarkin-Tainer has relayed to the Council,'" Luke said tersely. "Are you aware that the governments of three systems once policed by the Mandalorians have collapsed? That the trade along the Braxant Run has all but dried up, threatening the stability of another seventeen systems? With the Outer Rim Security Fleet partially tied up with the Killik matter, there isn't anyone else out there able to fill in that void. "
"Those are Outer Rim systems, and it's the job of the Imperial Remnant, Tion Hegemony, or the Corporate Sector to care for them," Kenth retorted. "All three are selfishly hoarding their wealth, and if they spent even a fraction of that fortune aiding their neighbors, then that problem wouldn't exist."
"It's always someone else's responsibility, huh?"
"Bluntly speaking, this time, yes. The Galactic Alliance has limited resources. Before we start helping non-member worlds and spending countless credits on ventures that don't strengthen us, we need to focus on building up the Core and Inner Rim worlds once more."
"The people in the Outer Rim are every much citizens of this galaxy."
"And the Imperial Remnant or Tion Hegemony would be the best candidates to help them out. They are the ones who will be directly affected by destabilization on their borders."
"The Jedi Order does not sacrifice countless lives simply because they do not benefit us," Luke warned darkly. "Use your influence, Hamner , to get another force out there to protect those people. Unless, of

course, you're saying that you're willing to put a price tag on every life out there? What's a child in the Outer Rim worth compared to one in the Core?"
"It's not that simple, Luke," Kenth replied sharply. "You can't just move a fleet group into the Outer Rim without upsetting some very important individuals in some very influential positions. Plus most available ships were sent with Anakin, and the others are on hand in case the Killiks already in the galaxy start a new offensive. In terms of priorities, the Outer Rim trade is pretty low."
"I'm sure the people in the Outer Rim don't think like that." Luke said.
"I am still the Grandmaster , so consider this a strongly urged request, and don't make me make it an order. Stop your bloc's obstruction of the Outer Rim security and reallocation bill."
"Or what?" Kenth Hamner replied mildly.
"Excuse me?"
"Or what, Master Skywalker?" Kenth repeated. "You may be the Grandmaster, but that position's been more like a figurehead this past decade."
Luke raised an eyebrow. "Let me put it a different way, Kenth. You can either be a Jedi or a politician. Continue down this path and I will have no choice but to excommunicate you from the Order. You cannot use the title Jedi only when it benefits you, then discard it when it becomes an inconvenience. It's bad not only for the Order, but also for the public who believe we condone your decisions by not doing anything about them."
"You cannot unilaterally excommunicate someone, Master Skywalker. You'd need the High Council's approval to do so, and we both know you won't get enough votes." Kenth allowed a sarcastic smile to cross his face. "Politics, after all."
Luke shook his head. "That is exactly what I mean, Kenth. When you start thinking as a politician and not a Jedi, you lose sight of the bigger picture."
"Then please enlighten me," Kenth said.
Luke reached into his robes and pulled out a datapad. "The votes you said I wouldn't get. The Jedi High Council was unanimous once they had time to think about the path the Order was taking."
Kenth stared at the information on the datapad in disbelief. "This…this can't be right. I know for a fact that Tresina Lobi was supportive of my run for Chief of State. Octa Ramis also thought that a Jedi was needed to head this government to turn things around."
"An office," Luke began softly. "That has nothing to do with the Jedi Order."

"Nothing to do with…It has everything to do with the Jedi Order. If we're hobbled by politics and bureaucracy then we might as well pack up our bags."
"You have your orders, Kenth," Luke said regretfully. "Stop obstructing the Outer Rim relief efforts. Especially while using the name of Jedi to do so. Because if you're so willing to turn a blind eye to those people so far away from the galactic center, then you are no Jedi."
"You can't just take charge again after ten years of ignoring the Order's affairs."
"I believe I just did," Luke continued patiently. "You have been a great friend and ally to the Jedi Order, Kenth, but somewhere along the way you lost sight of the values the Order was founded upon. Prove that you're still a Jedi at heart and use your power to aid as many as you can."
Kenth met Luke's penetrating gaze with his head tilted high. "I'll do as you ask, Luke. Just remember, you're only Grandmaster until the vote for the next one. What is done can be undone."
"Yes, but the lives that will be saved in the interim will be worth it," Luke replied. "I'll leave you to the meetings you'll have to call now, Kenth."
-)[-V-](-
"I'm sorry, I must have misheard you, but 'evacuate,' in our moment of triumph? I think you overestimate the Killik's chances."
Leia Organa Solo did her best to keep the smile on her face. Exchanging political body-blows wasn't very much fun, but it had to be done. Since her brother had bloodied Kenth Hamner's lip in Round One, Kenth had recovered magnificently and went back to the arena *he* was best at, namely the political realm. Good for him, bad for everyone else. "Senators, Master Hamner, Ministers. You've all seen the reports."
"We have," Kenth said, his caring expression disguising the pompous grin beneath the surface. "We have the best and brightest minds safeguarding the boarder of this galaxy. Some of our advanced ships are out there too."
"If we evacuate now, we send a signal of no confidence in your children's ability to do their job," the senator of the Rago sector added.
"These are just bugs," the Outer Jalor sector's senator said dismissively.
"These 'bugs' killed off a quarter of the senate, brought the galaxy to its knees without anyone even being the wiser," Leia pressed. She knew the round was going to him, however. Kenth had clearly gotten to them first and was now gambling with the lives of the citizens in those sectors in a blatantly political move. She locked eyes with the

smirking man. *How kind of you to risk the lives of others to benefit your own career, not very Jedi-like though.* "These 'bugs' have captured or killed billions, cost this government trillions in credits, and have left it teetering on a cliff's edge."
"At the cost of millions of their lives in turn," another senator argued back. "Even the most recent reports about the Killiks in this galaxy show that they are in full retreat, abandoning system after system to our forces."
Leia tried not to let her impatience show. "Senators, the fact remains that there are still millions more Killiks in this galaxy despite the losses we have inflicted on them. Yes, they are abandoning the systems they are currently in, but if projections are right, they will be passing through several heavily populated systems. It'll be foolish to assume that the Killiks will just pass through these systems without incident."
"And there is no guarantee that the Killiks will risk confrontation with the security forces already safeguarding these systems," Kenth countered. "If we send out evacuation notices we risk spreading a panic and destabilizing local governments that sorely need the people to believe in them. Not to mention that any work-stoppages and evacuations will cost these sectors billions in credits per week. That's credits they cannot afford to lose in the current climate."
"And if these people are all Joined, you won't be getting much money from them," Senator Chuchi spoke. "Analyzing their attack and past actions, there is a sizable risk for those civilians in the affected sectors."
"We leave those sectors and we as good as throw in the towel. It'll take decades for those sectors to regain their stability again."
"Better decades than never," Minister Ta'laa Ranth reasoned with his colleagues.
"Why don't we leave it up to the governors of the various systems," Kenth Hamner said, regaining control of the conversation. "We inform them of the probable risk…"
"Probable?" Leia interrupted. Lives were on the line and she'd be damned if she let Kenth's political games stop mass slaughter. "What's probable about several hundred Killik vessels traveling through the main hyperspace routes in the Outer Rim? That's a cold hard fact. The Galactic Alliance lost eight Jedi and several dozen capital ships in the last Killik 'retreat.' Twenty-three planets were either strip-mined, razed, or otherwise had their populations drastically reduced, and that was within the span of a week! Sure we can leave it up to the governors in the system, but that's after telling them that they should save a charge in their blaster for themselves if they stay."

"Hyperbole doesn't suit you, Ambassador Solo," Kenth said mildly. "And you discount the rest of the Outer Rim Security Fleet as well as the various other Galactic Alliance Fleet elements still on station. Both have skilled Jedi in their midst and will undoubtedly give the Killiks pause. We'll send a message to the governors of the systems in the path of the Killiks, but anything more is a waste of resources."
Leia smiled tightly across the table at her obstinate colleague. "Their lives will be on your head, Kenth. The Jedi aren't invincible or infallible. Whether it's the Jedi on those fleets or my children. We have to stop looking at them as tools and instead as living beings."
"Living beings who can accomplish so much more than the average soldier or diplomat," Kenth countered, his retinue of politicians nodding their heads like pack nerfs. He finally allowed a victorious smile as it became clear the committee they were in was going to support his proposed course of action. "Don't worry, Ambassador Solo. The situation is well under control now that your children have stepped up to take the fight to the bugs."
"For all our sakes, Kenth, I hope you're right."
-)[-VI-](-
"The galaxy needs the Jedi Order, that much is clear," Kenth Hamner's image over the HoloNet reached out to the millions of viewers tuned in. "*The last time the galaxy went without a Jedi Order, the likes of Palpatine and his cronies were free to spread their terror and death with impunity. Grandmaster Skywalker is willing to spend billions of credits in reconstruction funds to protect the Outer Rim. That's funds that would have been spent by greedy politicians for their own pet projects. His niece and nephews led a fleet the size of which hasn't been seen since the Yuuzhan Vong War to safeguard the galaxy because the GA's own admiralty is tied up in those same politics that have mired the government for nearly a decade. If the Jedi were allowed to cede from the central government, who will stand up for the rights of those with no voices? Who will ensure that corruption won't destroy the very foundation of our proud government? And who will protect us from the things that go bump in the night? Yes this galaxy needs change, it needs more Jedi intervention to keep us from sliding down this slope we are on. For without the Jedi, just imagine the chaos that will be spread."*
"He is the consummate politician," Mara remarked sarcastically, glancing at her sister-in-law. "Appeal to the public and let their fear do the deciding for them."
"What's worse is that he truly thinks that what he is doing is best for the galaxy," Leia commented, her eyes keeping track of Cassa. Her

granddaughter was currently huddled up with Ben, Janek, Kani, and a few other children from the Denon Temple in deep conversation "He has only the best intentions."
"What he needs to get is a brain," Mara grumbled. "The Jedi Order can't take on any more than it already has. He is severely overestimating our abilities."
"How's Luke handling things?" Leia said with concern. "I haven't had a chance to talk to him recently."
"Disappointed," Mara answered, sipping from the cup in her hands. "But you know Farmboy, he'll try to keep things to himself. He's hoping that the Jedi Order will have enough sense to elect a Grandmaster who'll keep everyone to the code."
"I know Saba has some hold over the other Jedi, but I also know that Hamner has more," Leia said with concern. "If the election for Grandmaster were held today, he'd win."
"Which is why Luke is so concerned and has spent the last couple of days talking with various Jedi Masters," Mara said. "He leaves early, gets back late. I doubt Ben and Janek have seen him for more than a few minutes at a time."
"There's a chance they might not want Luke to step down then," Leia said. "And if it keeps Hamner from becoming Grandmaster, Luke might have to stay in his position."
Mara made a displeased sound. "I know. Luke knows it too. But keeping the Jedi Order and the Galactic Alliance separate entities is his number one priority."
"Grandma," Cassa came bounding up as her new friends headed back into the temple.
"Cassa?" Leia raised an eyebrow.
The small blond girl motioned for Leia to bend down, as if she had a secret to tell. Mara raised an eyebrow at her sons, both of whom were actively avoiding her gaze…never a good thing.
"Come with me," Cassa whispered, taking Leia's hand.
"What's wrong?"
"Nothing," Cassa said evasively. "But Cousin Ben said it was okay."
"Oh?" Mara intensified her 'mom-gaze' on her oldest. "Think I should tag along too, Ben?"
"Errr…yes?"
Leia and Mara looked at each other almost resigned. The Force wasn't telling them that anyone was in danger, but given the track record of their respective families, adventure always wasn't far away.
"Okay, lead on," Leia said lightly.

Cassa and the other three led the two adults down a little used maintenance hatch.
"This way," Cassa said brightly.
"Where are we going?"
"To Click-Click-Clack's home."
"A new friend?" Leia chuckled, remembering when Jacen used to bring the random animal into his dorm on Yavin.
"Uh huh," Cassa nodded.
"I did tell them that this probably was a bad idea," Kani Asari said timidly.
"Don't worry," Mara reassured the young eleven year old. "Skywalkers and Solos, you'd have to be a miracle worker to keep them out of things that get them in trouble."
They emerged out into an unoccupied section of the Denon undercity, the only sign of anyone being the children-sized footsteps on the dust-covered road. As they neared a dilapidated factory, Mara and Leia once again exchanged wary glances.
"Cassa, what exactly is Click-Click-Clack?" Leia asked as they entered.
"A giant bug!" Cassa said proudly. "It looks like a grutchinya, but has these funny antennae. It's still a baby though."
"A giant bug…" Mara groaned. "Ben!"
"What! It's not my fault! Janek's the one who found him first."
"Was not!"
"Was too!"
It was too late to do anything now as a clicking and clacking sound sounded from the depths of the abandoned building.
"We're back!" Cassa said cheerfully, slipping her hand out of Leia's and running forward to greet the arrival.
The creature, a cross between a flightless Yuuzhan Vong burrowing insect and a beetle, clicked its mandibles in response.
"Cassa, stay back, that's a Killik," Leia said with some alarm.
"No it isn't," Cassa argued. "You said Killiks were big scary bug-people that ate other species. Click-Click-Clack isn't big or scary and hasn't eaten anyone, so he's not a Killik."
Knowing that arguing against six year old logic was a losing feat, Leia decided to switch tracks. "I also told you that Killiks Join people to their hives."
"Uh huh," Cassa grinned. "It's amazing. I can understand Click-Click-Clack's bug-speak the more I'm with him."
"Doesn't that make Click-Click-Clack a Killik?"
Cassa blinked. "Oh, I guess. He must be a nice Killik then."

At that, both Leia and Mara nearly face-palmed. Mara looked to her children. "I don't suppose you can understand the bug too?"
"Errr….will we be in any less trouble if we say no?" Janek asked.
Mara silently counted down from ten, keeping one eye on Click-Click-Clack and the other on her children. "No."
"Oh, okay, than we can understand Click-Click-Clack too," Janek said brightly before his brother could stop him.
"We're not the only ones," Ben protested quickly. "Some of the older kids in the temple have bug friends too. We found Click-Click-Clack because we followed them down here two weeks ago."
"So your excuse is, the older students are getting themselves Joined so you should too?" Mara folded her arms in front of her and raised an eyebrow.
"Can you give me a moment to come up with another excuse?" Ben said sheepishly.
In the meantime, Leia knelt by Cassa and reached out with her own limited Force-abilities to assess the young girl. "Are you okay, Cassa?"
"Uh huh," Cassa's green eyes watered. "Am I in trouble?"
"No," Leia said gently. "But you said you can understand Click-Click-Clack now?"
"A little," Cassa said in a tiny voice. "I really wanted to talk with him but my throat doesn't make the same sounds he does."
"Can he hear any of your thoughts too?"
"I think so, I wasn't sure he understood Basic, so I tried Huttese and Vongese too, but they didn't seem to work either. Then when I began to understand him, I asked if he wanted to understand me too, and then I tried to share with him my other languages. Mommy said it's always good to share knowledge so that others aren't afraid."
"Well, can you say goodbye to Click-Click-Clack?" Leia asked. "We need to take you to Master Cilghal for a small check up. We'll get her to look at the older students too."
"Umm….before that," Kani said hesitantly. "Ben and I kind of came up with a plan…well…more of an idea."
"Yes?" Mara replied evenly.
Kani looked to Ben. Having a best friend who's mom who was the former Hand of the Emperor of the Sith could be intimidating at times. Swallowing, Ben took over. "Well…we overheard the instructors talking about Cousin Anakin's plan. How they were going to have all the older Jedi form this giant meld and then try to send thoughts to the Killiks."
Mara continued to regard Ben with an impassive stare, and Kani quickly took over. "So we thought that if the older students were Joined

it would be easier to send thoughts to the Killik mind, I mean we'd have a direct link to them."
"You want to deliberately keep those older students Joined?" Leia asked.
"Errr…yes?"
"And the four of you?"
"It's kind of cool being Joined," Ben voiced, grimacing as he did.
Kani nodded. "Yeah, we're hearing all sorts of thoughts. It's all muddled at the moment but we can probably learn all sorts of things if the Joiner bond becomes stronger."
Mara looked to Cassa, Kani, Janek, and Ben and shook her head. "I think the four of you have had enough one-on-one time with the mind-controlling bugs. We'll let Master Gi know that her older students are compromised and go from there."
"But I won't be able to understand bug-speak any more," Cassa pouted.
"Later I'll teach you a Force-ability that will let you understand any language you hear," Mara said dryly.
"Oh, okay," Cassa brightened. She took Leia's hand again. "Let's go to Master Cilghal, grandma. Bye bye, Click-Click-Clack! Grandma says I shouldn't visit you again, sorry."
"No more adventures for you for a while," Leia tried to keep her voice light.
"That goes triple for you three," Mara addressed the other budding Jedi. "Next time you find a Killik you tell an adult about it."
"But we did," Janek said. "We told you and Auntie Leia."
"Right away," Mara deadpanned. "Not over two weeks later."
"Okay, next time we find a Killik we'll tell an adult right away," Ben agreed.
"Or anything dangerous that's trying to take over the galaxy," Mara added darkly, trying to plug the loophole in her order.
"Right," Kani nodded fervently.
"Did Click-Click-Clack tell you anything Cassa?" Leia asked the six year old skipping at her side.
Pretending her hands were the mandibles, Cassa opened and closed them as she spoke. "That he's sorry that his family is doing what they're doing but that they have to to make the galaxy a better place. He was going to take Ben and Kani and Janek and me to meet them tomorrow. Can we still go?"
"I think you'll have to pass," Leia shook her head.
"Alright," Cassa said reluctantly.

"Didn't your parents ever tell you not to talk to strange creatures or people?" Mara asked the small blond.
Cassa beamed. "Nope."
"They need to start working on that," Mara deadpanned. "This galaxy is a lot different than the cozy world of Zonama."
"Look on the bright-side Mara," Leia said dryly. "They just helped Anakin's insane plan get a leg up in this sector. The older Jedi *were* wondering how'd they be able to inject a thought into the Killik consciousness."
"Yeah, we helped," Ben chirped.
"Still grounded," Mara answered, her head tilted up the maintenance ladder at Ben's ascending form.
"But mo~om!"
"No buts," Mara grumbled, inwardly smiling and rolling her eyes along with Leia. "You and Kani should know better, especially with Janek and Cassa along. She might not know what a Killik is but I know you, Ben Skywalker, do."
"We just wanted to do our part," Janek voiced, sounding a little put out. "Like all the holo-magazines said we should be doing."
Pulling herself up back onto the Jedi Temple floor, Mara released a long breath. "I know. But your father and I and the two of you are going to have to have a talk, okay? Trying to save the galaxy is one thing, but think about the others that are helping you do it too. You're too young to be trying to shoulder any part of that burden. Ben, Kani, wait a couple more years at least."
"That's not to say we aren't grateful that you discovered some of the students had become Joiners," Leia said gently. "But you really should have let Uldir or one of the other instructors know."
The children nodded their heads, looking properly chastened.
-)[-VI-](-
For some great reason, even top-secret plans had trouble staying top-secret when said plans involved hundreds of people across the galaxy. The people weren't just Jedi, but the security forces who had to pick up the slack as the Jedi spent time 'removed' from the battlefield to focus on Anakin's plan. Once word got out that the Jedi were up to something, the public and media naturally became curious as to what it was.
Communication's Minister Pal'iva Konat was quick to jump on the chance, and once again politics and the Jedi Order merged for a grand spectacle. Though the Jedi would project their thoughts to the Killiks many more times, the 'inaugural time' was apparently something the galaxy wanted to see. Though the greater galaxy had no clue what was

occurring, or even knew of the plans in place, any insight into the mysticism of the Jedi Order was a hot topic for all. All anyone knew was that the great and mysterious Jedi Order was about to use their unseen powers to change the course of a war. Holo-cams floated about, the lights in the main hall of the Denon Temple kept at a theatrically low level.

All the Jedi in the Denon Temple were dressed up in their finest robes, walking in orderly lines into the main hall, youngest at the front. An audience of politicians, soldiers, and family members looked on from the sidelines as the Jedi lined up side-by-side, facing a stone dais at the front of the room. Masters, Knights, Apprentices, Students, just as Anakin had instructed, filled the room, ranging from those very strong in the Force to those who could barely feel it. Standing on the stone dais and illuminated by beams of white light, shrouded in their heavy Jedi robes, was Jedi Masters Luke Skywalker, Kenth Hamner and Saba Sebatyne. Kam Solusar stood on Saba's left, Tresina Lobi stood on Hamner's right.

An almost mystical gong sounded, and the Jedi standing before the dais knelt as one, sitting on the backs of their legs as the sounds reverberated off the walls. The gong sounded again, and Luke and the Masters standing at the forefront of everyone followed suit.

Han, sitting in the audience, leaned over to his wife. "So are Cassa and the kids going to do the whole mind-trick thing too?"

"No," Leia smiled softly, spying her granddaughter despite the uniformity provided by the Jedi robes. "They're too young for that. What they'll be doing is lending their strength to the older ones."

"And…what? What do the holocams expect to see? Won't they just be sitting there and thinking loudly?"

"Just watch," Leia shushed him, feeling the Force surge all around her. She closed her own eyes, reaching out with her limited abilities to add her own support to her brother and her granddaughter. It was almost mind-boggling to think that Jedi everywhere across the galaxy were performing the exact same acts, synchronized by the Force.

Han's prediction of Jedi 'just sitting there' wasn't entirely accurate. With showmanship befitting of an opera or holovid, the lights in the room shifted from the masters on the dais to the first rows filled with young Jedi. Murmurs from those watching began, eyes growing wide as the several dozen youths began to float in the air, still in their kneeling position, an invisible wind fluttering all around them. The invisible wind intensified for a few seconds, rustling their robes and causing those with longer hair to flutter about. The gong sounded once more, the

lights on the youngsters dimming, and the children were lowered back to the ground.
As the sound of the gong died off, the array of lights next focused on the knights present. They remained rooted to the ground, but the air around them was visibly distorted by their combined strength. The distortion was made even stronger by the energy the younger ones were lending to them. Small cyclones appeared between the rows of Knights, swirling and buffeting those around them.
The gong was rung once more. This time the Jedi Masters at the back of the room stood, their hands clasped together. Even those who couldn't feel the Force could suddenly see the glowing aura surrounding the older and wiser Jedi. A pulse of Force energy washed across the room, causing those in the audience section to gasp in surprise at the sudden warmth that suffused their being.
The lights dimmed completely now, leaving the Jedi and audience in near darkness.
"We are the Jedi Order," Luke Skywalker's voice rang out. "Sworn to protect this galaxy from those who might wish to plunge it into chaos. Wherever there is darkness, there will be light."
Lightsabers, one by one, activated, with the younger Jedi holding up glow-sticks to augment the light now stretching out from the seated Jedi.
"Emotion, yet peace," said Tresina Lobi, a row of lightsabers extinguishing.
"Ignorance, yet knowledge " Kam Solusar spoke, another row deactivating.
"Passion, yet serenity," Saba Sebatyne hissed, more sabers going dark.
"Chaos, yet harmony," Kenth Hamner said mildly.
"Death, yet the Force," Luke finished, the room once more in near-darkness. "Together we stand, united in common purpose. The Force is our ally, *you* all are the reason why we fight, why we dedicate our lives to defending those who cannot protect themselves. We are not soldiers, diplomats, scientists, engineers, or politicians. We are first and foremost Jedi, will always be Jedi in the traditions of the many that came before us and for the many that will defend the galaxy when we are gone. We cannot save everyone, but at the same time, we will try to save all we can, never forgetting it is we who serve the people and not the other way around."
Vid-screens activated in the corners of the room, showing images of Jedi within Yavin IV's Praxeum, Ossus, Dathomir, Corellia, and a scattering of images from the fleets and embassies abroad. All Jedi

were dressed as those in the Temple, all kneeling with their faces shrouded by the hoods of their robes.
"Stand with us," Luke said, the spotlight back on him. He stood and held out a hand."Only hand-in-hand can we succeed. Make this galaxy a better place."
"We are the Jedi Order," the Jedi said in unison, many voices rising up as one. "We are Jedi."
The Force surged in a way that everyone within several city blocks could feel, the message being heard even further as their words were broadcast across the stars.
The theatrics ended, the real work beginning as the Force wove in and out of every individual in the room, tying them together like pieces of a tapestry. Hearts beat as ones, breaths were even, thoughts forming from a group consensus. Those afflicted by the Joining unknowingly became the vehicle through which the greatest mind-trick in history was employed. The Force pulsated, swirled, ebbed and flowed, a sense of undeniable peace settling over the entire room.
They were the Jedi Order, doing what Jedi ages past had done, uniting to combat the darkness that threatened to swallow the galaxy. Because there was no way the galaxy was going to fall, not on their watch. Not ever.
-)[-Chapter End-](-

Corellians
-)[-I-](-
Ilum was a depressing planet, Jysella decided as she gazed upon its vast, empty expanse of rocky mountains and valleys. It also reminded her a bit too much of Relephon. With the blue-gray hue of the icy ground and the seemingly infinite array of stars above, it was hard for her to keep her emotions at bay. It was a cold world, a dim world, barren enough to match the void she felt within her.
"Jysella."
"Dad," Jysella acknowledged her father's approach.
"Hanging in there?"
"Yeah, you?"
"I'll mourn later," Corran said in answer, his hardened eyes taking in the same vista his daughter was viewing. "When we have the time."
"I'm not a soldier, dad. I'm a Jedi. At least I think I am."
"I know," Corran answered, voice tinged with regret. "And I'm not sure if being a Jedi is any better. At least soldiers are taught the brutal side of their job in boot-camp. Jedi have to learn it first hand when things don't go the way they want it to."

"We'll have millions Killiks descending on this system in a month," Jysella said tersely, her turbulent emotions rising to the surface. "The entire war, since they raised their ugly bug heads of theirs, the odds have always been against us. And for what? The bugs don't want to conquer, they don't want to rule or care about wealth. Thousands of their kind die holding a system, then they leave it of their own will, as if it all meant nothing to them. You're the Jedi Master, dad, tell me what in blazes is the will of the Force? What is the Force trying to say, trying to do? I'm a Jedi, but the Force isn't telling me a single frakken thing! Didn't even tell me why it had to take Val and Alema, two people were who doing *good* in this galaxy, over the stupid bug-huggers wrecking the place."
"Jysella…"
"It's okay dad, you don't have to say anything," Jysella's voice continued her voice becoming as wooden as her posture, she turned her head slightly and offered her dad a bitter smile. "Did you want something?"
His eyes softening slightly, Corran gestured to the base camp at the foot of the mountain they were standing on. "Bazel Warv, Seff Helin, and their apprentices have arrived. Yaqeel sent me to get you."
Jysella, almost fearfully, swallowed. They were her brother's friends. Friends who had been nice enough to let her tag along when she had been little. She almost didn't want to see them. "Strategy meeting?"
"I believe so," Corran said. "Look, Jysella I…"
"I'll go see them then," Jysella answered in clipped tones. She leaped off her perch and bounded her way down the mountainside towards the circle of tents at its base. On one hand she didn't want to face her childhood friends, on the other, she wanted to talk to her father even less. She couldn't handle the unfeeling front he put up, the 'I'll grieve when there's time to grieve' stoic fodder he put out. He was a *Jedi Master*, had control of his feelings and didn't need to mourn even with his only son dead. It just angered Jysella thinking about it. Doing her best to shut down her own emotions as she detected the presences of the others, she took a moment to catch her breath.
The Southern Hemisphere Ilum Command and Control center was buried into the mountainside and contained all manner of defenses. From heavy turbolaser batteries, laser-grid fences, underground sonic emitters, and minefields, it was to be the last line of defense in the battle for the planet. Landing pads large enough to accommodate frigate-sized vessels were scattered all about the area, and artillery units were dug in all over.
So much tech for such a useless ball of spacerock.

As Jysella strode through the camp, she vaguely registered the lines of tanks, mechanized attack units, speeders, and speeders undergoing maintenance checks. As impressive as the sight was, Jysella knew that there were over a dozen such gatherings all over the planet set out in a web-shaped pattern Most of the bases were underground and out of sight. Once the Killiks landed, there would be no escape for them.
She located the hatch that led into the mountain and followed the extremely narrow corridors towards the command room. She could feel her brother's apprentice, Tiu Zax, the enigmatic Omwati's mind closed off and betraying nothing as to the teen's emotional state.
The doors opened, and Jysella pretended she didn't see the sympathetic looks she was receiving from the others. "Barv, Seff, great that you could make it."
"Yes," Barv answered simply, his Rodian apprentice Twool standing next to him. "It took some convincing the last of the Hutt Council, but we managed to scrounge up a dozen ships for this crazy venture. At least the Hutts can now say they've helped to defend the galaxy."
Seff Helin and his own apprentice, a human hailing from Fondor, Alfie, just acknowledged Jysella with solemn nods.
"Well then," a slightly subdued Yaqeel said with false cheer. "Shall we get to it? Anakin Solo's tasked us with holding this system for as long as we're able. With the added forces from Fondor and Hutt Space, we can fill in a few of the gaps we've had in our defenses."
Jysella could only clench her jaw, her brown eyes glaring stonily at the holoprojector in front of them. She let Yaqeel and the others go on for a few minutes about various maneuvers and positioning, but had had enough. With a single hand she pounded the table, silencing everyone with her outburst. "We can go over battle plans as much as we like, but we all know they won't last more than a minute once the bugs get here."
"Jysella," Natua said softly.
"Don't 'Jysella' me! I've had enough of pretending it's business as usual!" Jysella hissed at the Falleen. She flicked the holoprojector. "The bugs are coming, great. But instead of waiting around and twiddling our thumbs I say we should start on the offensive. The less bugs that reach here are bugs we don't have to worry about later."
"But the plan was to hold this system. We don't have the forces required to…"
"Space that Seff," Jysella growled. "If my brother could hold off a force of bugs several hundred times the size of his force than we can damn well do more than that with several times that number! We do the same thing the Vong did during the war, hit and run. The bugs only

have numbers going for them. We have better ships, training, and weapons. Any one of our pilots is worth ten, twenty of theirs. Anakin Solo wants us to defend this system but he never gave us any instructions on how we should do that."
"We might scare off the bugs, make them choose a different route to invade from." Yaqeel said, shaking her head.
"We have the Jedi meld. If simple convincing doesn't work than we mind-spike their hive-mind and *force* them to come to Ilum," Jysella said coldly. "These bugs are so eager to die for their cause, I say we help them do so as quick as possible."
"I agree," Tiu Zax finally spoke up. The white feathers on her head ruffled slightly as she stepped forward. "Jedi Knight Horn has a sound point. Tactically speaking, if the numbers our forces face when the Killiks get here are less than they are now, we have a better chance of holding this system. Hit-and-run attacks to bleed the enemy forces will help in the long run. One or two ships at a time, unless we hit one with a queen, will not be noticed by the hive-mind. You don't notice when you lose skin cells or a hair, so will it be with the Killiks."
"Integrate the Hutts and Fondor forces to the planetary defenses if you want," Jysella said to Bazel and Seff. "Tiu and I will be taking the Corellians and hunting bugs."
"Jysella," Yaqeel tried again.
But Jysella turned on her heels. Tiu Zax moved from her corner of the room to join her. Jysella stopped in the doorway. "Continue doing whatever plan you have, Yaqeel. But sometimes, for a Jedi to defend, they have to attack first. It's what Anakin did in the war against the Vong, and it's what we should have been doing since the start of this one. Passive aggressiveness never did anyone any favors."
The door slid shut behind her, and Jysella walked back through the halls, Tiu following silently behind her. Once back in the frosty, sunless atmosphere of Ilum, Jysella let out a cloudy breath. "You don't have to come along, Tiu."
"Your brother was my master and my friend," Tiu answered, a hint of steel in her voice. "If the situation was reversed and you had been the one lost, I have no doubt he would have torched all of Relephon to avenge you."
"Not sure if that's comforting or not," Jysella said with a dry laugh. "Knowing that I'll be the straw that sends him over to the dark side for good."
"Would such an act truly be dark?" Tiu asked. "He would be preventing the Killiks from harming another and eliminating one of the greatest enemies to the Hapan throne at the same time. They were the

aggressors, cared not for who lived or died. Is the galaxy not better off without them?"
Jysella had no answer for that. She already knew she had an uphill argument with her father to win. After all, Jedi Master Corran Horn wasn't about to just let her take the Corellians out on a mission that was mostly rooted in vengeance and anger. Anakin's actions had been called dark when he advocated the first Jedi attacks on Yuuzhan Vong forces, but they had ultimately been what the Jedi needed to do to win the war. Sitting around and waiting for an enemy to come was all well and good, if you liked painting a giant target on you that is. Immobile, entrenched forces were great in some respects, but absolutely useless in others. She'd give the bugs a reason to attack Ilum in addition to what the great mystical meld was telling them. And she'd do so to protect as many of the defenders' lives as she could.
She was a Jedi after all.
-)[-II-](-
Jysella never considered herself a military person, that had been Valin's role. She had always been the people-person of the family, inheriting her mom's knack for convincing people to do things they might not usually do. But that didn't mean she was a novice in that area either. She had received the same training Valin had from their father and adoptive grandfather, had studied some of the same textbooks hotshot pilots like Syal Antilles and the renown VibroSwords read in the academy.
Fortunately, the Corellian fleet didn't rely on her lack of experience to get the job done. In charge of it was an old pro at guerilla warfare and odds-beating, General Wedge Antilles himself. And fortunately her dad was good friends with General Wedge Antilles.
Not so fortunate for her, her dad was a Jedi Master. A traditional, Luke Skywalker-era Jedi Master who had close brushes with the dark side, fought dark siders, and was all around against the whole 'Jedi aggressive' angle.
"Do you know what you're asking," Corran said evenly. "A Jedi does not seek revenge."
"I know, and I'm not. I'm simply ensuring that the bugs die a whole lot quicker and easier so our own people don't have to," Jysella said, pacing back and forth in the empty conference room as she tried to make the case to her mom and dad. "In this case, in order for us Jedi to do our jobs right, we have to go on the offensive. We need to kick over the ant's nest, shake the hive, stomp on a few bugs, make the Killiks so angry that they won't do anything more than come after us on Ilum. This isn't about Valin any more, about light or dark or offense and

defense. It's about tactics. We have tens of millions of bugs, several thousand bug ships, heading towards us. Don't you think it's smarter if we lessen that number before they hit our lines?"
"Do I think it's smarter we risk the lives of all the Corellians that trust us to bring them back home alive by increasing the odds they face? We're asking them to die for everyone else."
"Anakin Solo said it best, this is *our* galaxy," Jysella argued back. "If we *Corellians* want to be relevant to in it, then we damn well better do our part. If we *Jedi* want to protect this pit of a place we live in, then we need to do more than sit back and wait for the danger to come to us! We did that in the Vong War and nearly got our heads handed to the Vong on a platter. We do it to these bugs and we'll be worm food. The old Jedi ways just aren't going to cut it anymore dad, not if we want the Jedi to survive another generation."
"Our fleet has a better chance of surviving any attack all together," Corran said. "As a *united* galaxy and not as individual governmental fleets."
"I have a recommendation."
The Horns looked to the doorway.
"Wedge?" Corran's eyes widened slightly. His surprise melted away into a smile as he stood and held out his hand. "Wow, it's been a while. Good to see you, sir."
"You too, Corran. And not 'sir,' haven't been your commanding officer for decades," Wedge returned Corran's handshake and back-slapping hug. "I just stopped by because Jedi Saav'etu told me you Corellians were plotting something."
"Planning," Jysella clarified.
"We're Corellian, so it's 'plotting'," Corran corrected. "And we kind of are."
"I've heard that much," Wedge took another seat at the empty conference table. "Fortunately for you masters of the mystical, I haven't yet completely brought into the Jedi dogmas that seem to be driving the two of you nuts."
"So what do you suggest, Wedge?" Mirax said, her eyes glimmering.
Wedge steepled his fingers as he stared distantly at the wall. "The hyperspace lanes out here are fatally unstable, so gallivanting off in hopes of heading off the bugfleet in a fleet-group is suicide. What we *can* do, however, is slap together a few Jedi-led fighter squadrons and harass the Killiks. Keep them hopping mad. Not that I don't trust you Jedi in luring them here, but we need the Killiks fully focused on the bait. Can't have them sending out a few feelers to see if there are more appetizing targets elsewhere. We do what we did against the

Empire. Drop out of hyperspace, fire off a few torpedoes, down a ship, and then leave. If intel is right, most of their smaller vessels are unshielded so we should be able to inflict a lot of casualties this way. The greatest risk is to those fighter-pilots, who will have no back up should anything go wrong."
"So you're saying we need the best pilots in the fleet, Jedi and otherwise?"
"Pretty much," Wedge nodded. "The best ships, latest weapons, and shield-tech too, let's not shortchange them. Since Anakin Solo managed to get us funding for some of the best the GA has to offer, let's use it so recklessly that the government will think twice before doing it again."
"I'll start coming up with a list," Corran nodded.
Wedge pulled out a datapad from his pocket and stared at it for a long moment, before sighing and sliding it across the table towards the Horns. Corran picked it up, looked it over, and then slowly looked back to Wedge.
"You sure?"
"She swore an oath," Wedge said with a forced smile. "Can only protect her for so long. Do me a favor and get a Jedi who knows what he or she is doing for her squadron."
"I'll go too," Jysella volunteered after setting the datapad down.
"Sella," Mirax disengaged herself from the wall, and losing the casual air she had picked up.
"Have to represent Corellia's Jedi," Jysella smiled faintly. "In fact I'm the only Corellian Knight with any time in an actual starfighter thanks to Grandpa Horn's CorSec training lessons."
Jysella missed the haunted looks exchanged by Corran and Wedge.
"Welcome aboard," Corran finally managed. "Stay alive Jysella. You can do more for people that way."
"No promises daddy," Jysella's own voice softened. "But I will try."
"That's all I'll ask, I suppose," Corran replied, looking his age as he rubbed his face. "Wedge and I will see what we can do about contacting the rest of these pilots, refining the plan a little more. In the meantime, brush up on those flying skills in the simulators."
-)[-III-](-
"VibroSword Five reporting in," Syal Antilles spoke into her comm as the check-in commenced.
A veteran pilot of many different engagements, Syal Antilles was no longer the eager, green rookie trying to prove herself to…well...herself. Even after all the crazy missions she had been on, however, her current mission had them all beat. As she checked the systems of her

Eta-Five interceptor, she once again wondered if the higher-ups had lost their minds. It didn't really help that her own father was included in said group of higher-ups.
After all, what sane commander would send two frigates, a carrier, and a single wing of fighters against an entire element of the approaching Killik fleet. And what sane commander would make the chosen battlefield in a system about to be swallowed up by a black-hole, with hyperspace lanes torn to pieces?
According to the sensor buoys scattered across the Unknown Region by the Vagaari and Chiss forces, this element of the Killik fleet had broken off and was heading towards several systems rich in resources. Given how the higher-ups wanted the Killiks to arrive en masse at two specific star-systems, this deviation was a big no-no and it was now down to their group to dissuade the hive mind of such an action.
With two frigates, a carrier and a single wing of fighters.
On the edge of a black-hole.
Sure the higher-ups had come up with several tactics and maneuvers designed, in theory, to keep them alive. But Syal would have liked to see the likes of her older cousin 'Moff' Jagged Fel, or one of the Solos along for the ride. Syal also wondered how Admiral Bres-Durron allowed herself to be talked into heading the attack force. And also wondered if the admiral was thinking the same thing.
To make matters even more complicated, all the fighters out of the *Dodanna* were being coordinated by some Rebellion-era Jedi's Force abilities. The lead fighter squadron, Gray Squadron—nicknamed Grey Squadron in honor of said Jedi—were all Aleph fighters and commanded by General Shara. They were also damned good pilots that operated in a creepy synchronization that Syal had come to see in Killik attacks.
"*Bugs, why does it always come down to bugs*," VibroSword Four, Erin Dodanna, said over a private channel.
"*What I want to know is why does it always come down to insane plans with only a prayer's chance of succeeding,*" Squadron leader Captain Lujayne Darklighter interjected.
"I was thinking the same thing Lead," Syal chuckled softly. It was hard to remain upbeat when they were three of four original VibroSwords still in the squadron. Some had died, like Syal's own wingman Tamith Kartia Niathal in a battle against Killik forces. Others had transferred to different branches of the military, such as Adrina Devis, who had decided to join the Imperial Remnant's Fleet Command.

"*What I want to know is how we always end up doing these insane missions,*" the last original VibroSword, the Devoronian Brun Garix sighed.
"Our squad leader volunteers us," Syal answered dryly.
"*Way to be supportive Five,*" Lujayne retorted.
The pre-battle banter died off as their sensor panels began flashing various indicators.
"*All fighters stand by, the Killik forces have entered the net*," came the voice of Admiral Bres-Durron.
The net being a web of sensor beacons and dovin-bassal mines designed to confuse and momentarily entrap the Killiks in the system. The system itself was on the verge of being swallowed by a black-hole at its center and was simply known as S3W-451 in Chiss starcharts.
"*Detonating gravimetric mines*," Jedi Knight Jysella Horn's voice came over the comm, devoid of emotion.
Syal's starfighter sensors continued to flash in warning as the gravity shadows in the already ravaged system were torn apart even more. The Killik vessels that were being dragged out of hyperspace by the dovin-bassal mines were suddenly subjected to violent tidal waves of gravimetric backlash—as if giant hands had grabbed their ships and were now pulling on them in hundreds of directions. Ships were torn apart in a spectacularly violent fashion, multiple explosions quickly swallowed by the tides of gravity washing over them.
Syal couldn't help but grimace. A brainchild of Vagaari engineering, the gravimetric mines were normally harmless against well-shielded ships or stable hyperspace lanes. Apart from adding small bumps in the road, they were not strong enough on their own to damage anything. However, in the shadow of a black-hole, in a system where the hyperspace lanes were already barely-existent, the mines amplified the chaos to lethal levels.
More than a dozen Killik capital ships were shredded from the depth-charge like effects the mines created. Others developed massive dents in the sides of their haul as if a giant fist had slammed into them.
The remaining Killik vessels began firing, its dartfighters swarming out by the hundreds.
Just as Syal was about to lock her first warheads onto their targets, another voice came over the comm.
"This is Phantom squadron, moving into position and beginning our run now. Thanks for the cover flyboys."
Syal involuntarily twitched at the voice and hastily reached over to flick her comm on. "Myri? What in blazes are you doing here?!"

"*Phantom squadron volunteered to be our fleet's eyes and ears, Syal. Don't worry, we're Corellian, odds have nothing on us.*"
Heart now pounding a much harder rhythm, the Corellian pilot tried her best to wet her suddenly dry lips. Syal had known that the fighter squadrons would cover an intel team during the fight. She just hadn't realized that it would be her little sister's team. Her little sister, who would be one of a dozen individuals catching a ride on a Killik ship all for the purposes of relaying intel back to the fleet. Suicidal didn't even start to cover the specifics of *that* particular part of the plan.
"Oh heck, does dad know you're out here?"
"*Need to know, he didn't*."
"He's going to ground you so bad," Syal groaned.
"*If I make it out of this*," Myri sounded upbeat, much like their mom always did. How she managed to do so when she would soon be spending the next couple of months secreted away onboard a Killik ship heading into the mother of all Jedi traps was beyond Syal.
"*Cut the chatter*," Lujayne interjected, as if she knew what Syal's reaction would be even when the sisters had been communicating over a private channel. The two were the closest of friends and had flown so often that they could practically read each other's minds. "*Here comes the bugs.*"
"*We're heading for the larger ship protected by all the other ones, designating it on your systems now*," Myri reported over the fleet-channel with full professionalism. "*Please try not to blast that one. Keep the door open until we get there."*
Syal refocused on the incoming dartfighters and set her targeting reticle over the darkest cluster. Without even waiting for a target lock she fired off two torpedoes into the crowd. The torpedoes streaked along with many dozens more, and the resulting chain of explosions that rippled through the Killik lines, reminded Syal of fireworks during the Corellian victory celebration of the end of the Vong War.
As the warheads tore gaps in the Killik lines, a ship that appeared to be ninety-percent engine roared forward. It looked like it was held together by the sheer momentum of the vessel, small bolts and plates being shaken free practically in front of their eyes.
"*Spooks*," muttered another VibroSword, no doubt shaking his head at the unorthodox boarding craft.
"*Reacquire target and fire,*" came the order.
Syal let loose another pair of warheads, then switched to lasers and began stitching the oncoming wave of fighters. When faced with a non-hostile threat barreling towards them and a small line of enemy craft

shooting at them, the hundreds of dartfighters ignored the disintegrating all-engine ship entirely.
Good luck Myri, Syal breathed to herself as the Killiks filled the gap and blocked the odd craft from view.
"*All fighters switch to Phase Besh*."
Grimacing, Syal diverted all power to her engines—since her shields really weren't anything to brag about even if more power was given to them—and gunned the throttle along with the rest of the squad. Accelerating to full speed, nearly three dozen starfighters zipped and zigged through the mass of dartfighters. A couple GA fightercraft met unfortunate ends, crashing into a Killik-controlled ship or were blasted by several hundred guns, but the majority broke through the screen. Before the Killiks could turn to pursue this group, the second half of the GA fighterwing swerved out from behind the nearby remains of a planet and opened fire, scattering the attention of the hive-mind for a precious few seconds. At the same time, the front half of the fighterwing continued forward and began firing everything they had at the mass of Killik Shard cruisers in the distance. The entire goal was to pose a bigger threat to the hive-mind than the disintegrating engine-ship that held the crack intel team. Escape was also on the menu; so once the fighters fired off their payloads, they promptly veered towards a hyperspace lane marked by beacons and began a hasty retreat.
For her part, even as the dartfighters swarmed all around her, Syal lined up her targeter on several of the larger capital ships and released the last of her warheads. Her engines continued to burn brightly, propelling her ahead of the dozens of Killik dartfighters streaking after her.
"This is VibroSword Five, quiver empty, retreating to fallback point," Syal reported her fighter pinging with rapid-fire projectiles from the plethora of Killik fighters trying to blow her to pieces. A divot was blown in the side of one of her wings, sparks flaring for a fraction of a second before all the oxygen was consumed. Jysella rolled her eyes in annoyance and sent her fighter into a series of acrobatic turns and dives that had several Killik squadrons spiral after her in almost organic motion.
"*FireSpar Six, warheads expended, following you out V-Sword Five.*"
Syal allowed a small smile as the ChaseX of Tiom Rordan fell behind her own. Though ChaseX fighters couldn't keep up with an Eta-Five they did have one much appreciated difference. "Great Six, I could use those shields of yours."
"*That bug-frigate is moving into our path*."

"Your idea to follow me," Syal quipped, setting her lasers to rapid-fire, an innovation borrowed from the Hapans. Despite the size and odds, Syal felt nothing but calm and immediately knew that the Jedi in charge of their wing was 'hijacking' her instincts. "Target coordinates set."
"*Roger.*"
The two starfighters continued their blazing course forward, Killik fighters by the dozens streaking after them and laser fire by the dozens pouring out from the frigate in front of them. They nimbly weaved and dove, keeping on track and guided by the Force. Without a single word passing between the two of them, both she and Tiom opened fire in perfect unison at point blank range, their combined six laser cannons narrowing in on a location just behind the bridge of the Ssi-ruuvi-inspired shell-like Shard cruiser. As if they had sliced a lightsaber through the ship, the unshielded frigate erupted into two different sections in a blaze of green fire. Both Syal and Tiom's fighters burst right out the middle of the new debris field, and several of the pursuing dartfighters slammed into the remains of the frigate.
Syal felt her heart pounding against her ribcage. "Yeeeeha!"
"*Gotta love the Jedi sometimes*," Tiom laughed in turn.
In the background, the engine-ship that Myri was on appeared to self-destruct, blowing itself into a messy debris field in the middle of the Killik fleet.
Before Syal could jump to hyperspace, she heard her sister whisper.
"*See you on the far-side, sis.*"
Knowing better than to response, Syal just closed her eyes and exhaled. One battle done, who knew how many more to go.
-)[-IV-](-
You would think nothing would beat fighting impossible odds at the edge of a black hole. But apparently her superiors wanted to correct that notion as quickly as possible. Well her superiors and her 'superior' thinking little sister. Syal supposed she should be relieved that after a week and a half of silence Myri had managed to send her first report back to the fleet. The ship Myri had stowed away on had rejoined the main bug fleet, but another large portion of bug-ships had been sent out. Said portion had split into two, and of course the Jedi in charge of their little Galactic Alliance fleet had designated the larger of the two halves as the first target.
And of course the Jedi in charge had to choose the battle ground too. A ternary star system, two white dwarfs orbiting a red giant, with the remains of several planets destroyed by the powerful gravity waves distorting the system. Again hyperspace routes were limited and there

was a great danger of being pulled into the suns that made up most of the system. But what was one to expect when fighting in the Unknown Regions. There was a reason why they stayed 'unknown' despite the many survey teams sent out to map it.
Syal didn't know how the Jedi with their taskforce had managed it, but somehow the mystical hand-wavers had diverted their targeted fleet group into such a hellish battlefield *on purpose*.
"*Everyone stay alert. The gravitational forces in this system mean that its lasers only, manual targeting,*" Admiral Bres-Durron reminded. "*We only have to keep the bugs interested enough until our demo teams give the signal.*"
Ah, yes, Syal thought to herself. The key part of the plan. The trade-off was that they were sacrificing one of their frigates—a Yuuzhan Vong ship ironically named *Glorious Death*—to take out close to fifty bug capital ships and sundry supporting vessels. How else would one blow up a sun? It was bad enough to fight near a black hole, now they were about to create one…or maybe a couple of supernovas. The three stars were the giant bug-light, and the frigate the fuse to make the bugs all crispy. She doubted the red giant would appreciate having one of its orbiting suns shoved into it via dovin basal.
Thank the Yuuzhan Vong for finding an easy way to cause heavenly bodies to collide with their oversized biots.
This plan was much more dangerous than previous hit-and-run raids. For one, if the Galactic Alliance taskforce was still in the system when the suns went boom, they'd be dead too. For two, the dovin basal needed time to charge up and overload. It had been in position for the past two days now being given 'steroids' to make the frigate-grown dovin basal twice its size and many times its function. It was now steadily emitting a powerful gravitational pull on one of the white dwarfs but needed an hour or two to bring it to 'boom' depth.
For three, the Killik fleet was about to arrive in a matter of minutes. Again Syal had to question Jedi Jysella Horn and the others in charge of their little fleet. Sure the VibroSwords and other squadrons were elite, but they were hardly invincible. One thing was certain, Syal thought grimly as her fighter squadron loomed ever closer to the center of the system, their forces would be a lot smaller than they started out with.
The Killik fleet arrived without any dramatics, without any strategic formation. It was just one ship after another dropping out of hyperspace and into the brightly lit system. The ternary nature of the system meant that the gravitational pull was strong enough to prevent them from leaping to hyperspace right way. In fact, both the Killiks and

Galactic Alliance ships were marooned in-system until they left the heliosphere at the very edge of the system.
"*All…ready for…on….own…luck…"* the comm-system crackled as the solar radiation began to degrade the signals.
Syal exhaled slowly, clearing her mind as best as she could as she felt an alien instinct fill her. She should have been panicked that the main lifeline for all fighter squadrons, their ability to communicate, vanished. That her targeting sensors were more than worthless given the electro-magnetic distortions the constant solar flares being vented had on the electronics of her fighter. In fact, said electro-magnetic and radiation was completely lethal if not for her fighter's paper-thin shields and modified environmental suit she wore over her flightsuit.
But the Jedi weren't giving her the opportunity to be worried about all those negative details. She had a mission to accomplish, that one thought was what was being hammered into her head over and over again. Her own worries, her own fears and nerves, they were now inconsequential to what had to be done. Her one feeling of reassurance —from the knowledge that the bugs were getting the rads and electro-magnetic damage much worse than her—was amplified many times over to bolster her will.
It was almost scary for Syal to go from a complete ball of nerves worried about the sanity of her leadership, to someone who barely felt the pressure and was ready to do any and everything to get the mission done. She piloted her fighter to coordinates that flashed through her mind like an epiphany. Jedi melds were unnerving for most of those who couldn't feel the Force, and Syal was no exception. Rounding out her shield-trio were Erin Dodanna and another new VibroSword pilot whom she had only met in passing.
Already the Killiks were reacting to the threat of the Galactic Alliance ships. With the numbers they had arrived in, it was clear that the bugs preferred to wipe out this small annoyance than retreat from it. Rivers of dartfighters began to peel off from the carriers, shielded spitcrete frigates surged forward with black hulls gleaming in the near blinding light of the suns.
Lightminutes away seemed like mere seconds to Syal. One moment she was in the middle of a stable formation, her lasers trained on the mass of bug vessels, and the next she was chest deep in said vessels. Half on instinct and half because some mystical power was twitching her muscles at the right moment, she had her Eta-Five performing all sorts of high-speed maneuvers in perfect unison with her shield-trio. The Killiks quickly learned that all of their missiles were useless in the powerful pull of the suns, and that even at full-throttle they could only

move at a snail's pace. With the Galactic Alliance strike-group situated with their backs to the suns, the Killiks could hardly rely on visual targeting either.
Which meant it was open-season for the Galactic Alliance ships. Volley after volley of lasers and ion blasts poured out of the GA fighters, stitching the Killik formation with continual explosions and spinning dartfighters in death throes.
But as the Killiks had shown in every engagement prior, they just didn't care. They pressed forward—fifty-plus capital ships and their supporting vessels—their own energy weapons opening up. The beam-weapons of the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium, the masers of the Chiss Ascendancy, gravity-vortex cannons of some unnamed Unknown Region species, lasers of various spectrums, the Killiks' return fire was nearly tenfold what they had received. Though their targeting systems were equally hampered by the sun, if one threw enough deadly energy out in a set direction, one was bound to hit something.
The Jedi did their best to keep the seventy-two plus fighter pilots alive, but there were only four of them with the fleet concentrating on the Battle Meld. A Chase-X vanished in an explosion that seemed to pale against the backdrop of the white sun it was in front of. A maneuvering Aleph fighter was winged, an engine out, but its loss of momentum immediately had it pulled towards the red giant. The GA fighters continued to fire back, vaping ten, twenty dartfighters for every one of theirs lost, but the bugs just weren't dying fast enough.
"Come on," Syal gritted her teeth, the bugs entering dogfighting range. She cast a glance towards the second white dwarf, even with her cockpit polarized the light was near blinding. Yet she could see a spiraling tendril extend out of the smaller sun towards the singularity created by the dovin basal. They needed more time.
Another GA fighter vanished in a small puff, the proximity of the enemy fighters forcing everyone to break formation.
Her astromech blerped out the count-down to detonation.
No way were they surviving the thirty minutes needed.
Even as Syal flamed another three dartfighters that flew in front of her, she saw a VibroSword fighter get sheered into pieces by suicidal diving runs from a whole stream of dartfighters. Then she nearly got pasted herself if not for the Jedi controlling her movement getting her to juke her fighter in time. The rush of bug-fighters temporarily blocked out the sun on her port-side.
The fact that they could still work in such harmony was wholly unfair. It wasn't like they had a cluster-ship like the Vong, or some communications vessel they could hit.

Then the thought struck Syal. Ignoring the Jedi in her head, she angled her fighter up and out of the dogfight. Good wingman that she was, Erin Dodanna followed her without hesitation.
"Seven, mark the most important looking bug-ship out there," Syal ordered her Astromech.
'*What parameters?'*
"You have the tactical analysis package installed, which one of those fifty capital ships is being protected the most?"
'*Long range sensors not functioning. Please get closer.'*
"How close?"
'Point blank range would be preferable.'
"That's suicide."
'It's your query.'
"Fine," Syal hissed. She glanced back to the scrum she had left. "If we stayed there any longer we were as good as dead anyways. Increase power to the engines, let's hope the Jedi in my head knows what I'm doing. I sure don't."
Her and Erin's Eta-Fives roared out away from the suns' harmful effects.
"*We got a plan, Syal?*" Erin's voice came over the channel.
"Yeah we buy ourselves more time," Syal called back. "These bug fleets always reacted like a living organism when we attacked their command ships. "
"*Lead, you do realize that if we antagonize them, we'll be trapped between the big ships and hundreds of angry fighters?*"
"Well it's not my fault the all mighty Jedi couldn't think of anything better," Syal retorted. "Feel free to dive back into the fray if you want to end your life that way instead."
"*Academy always said to stay with my wingman. Even if she does need a psych-eval or three.*"
"So who's the more foolish, the fool or the one who follows her?" Syal bantered, shunting power back to her shields as the capital ship armada loomed ever closer.
"*I'll answer that when we get back to my grandpa's namesake*."
"Seven, plot us the best course through those ships."
'*You rely on me way too much. It's against my programming to self-terminate.'*
"What?"
'*Syal said that the mission was suicidal. Error, cannot plot a course that will lead to our destruction.'*
"Oh for…fine switch it to manual." Syal shook her head and made a mental note to lecture her astromech later.

"*Looks like the Jedi finally clued in to what you're doing, we have friendly fighters joining us*," Erin reported.
"About time," Syal muttered. "We'll let them catch up, you have the designated target?"
"*Roger."*
"Then here we go."
There was a noticeable whine as the engines of the Eta-Five were once again pushed passed their factory-level safeguards and sent Syal and Erin shooting forward.
All at once, they were caught in a sea of turbolaser fire. Fortunately the Jedi in their minds was on point and guided them through it all. Syal barely flinched as lasers bigger than her fighter zoomed past. The storm became even more violent the closer the two fighters got.
"Oh this is fun," Syal gritted out with a delirious laugh.
"*One hit from those things and we're toast,*" Erin's own tension clear in her voice.
They skimmed along the surface of a Shard cruiser to minimize the chances of being targeted. After all, who in their right mind would fire capital-ship killing lasers at a friendly vessel? But then Syal was forgetting that these were Killiks they were up against. The cruiser they were traveling along was promptly inundated with turbolasers from its fellow capital ships and literally blew up beneath them.
"*Damn it!*" Erin said in a rare show of anger.
"Report," Syal said quickly. The fighters veered upwards, and were once again caught in the briar patch of laserfire.
"*Left engine housing was punctured by shrapnel, I'm losing speed."*
"Very bad timing, Erin!" Syal felt her stomach drop out. She looked off to her side to see that Erin's fighter was smoking and not rising nearly as fast as her own.
"*No kidding right? I'm going to tell my astromech to give me all power to my other engine."*
"Erin…"
"*Not making it out of this one, we both know it. You were always the better pilot,*" Erin said with a laugh that held many emotions. "*Just make sure they don't name anything after me, okay? Looks like I'm continuing the family tradition after all…"*
"Erin…" But Syal could see that her wingmate had switched her comm off.
Syal could only watch, her heart shattering as Erin's Eta-Five recklessly surged forward towards the nearest important looking ship. The laser fire grew thicker on her approach, but it was too late.

Without a sound, Erin slammed her fighter directly into the conning tower of a heavily armed Shard cruiser. As if something vital was hit, a massive explosion ripped through the entire tower and appeared to travel downwards into the Vagaari-influenced saucer section.
The resulting devastation definitely got the hive-mind's attention, and whole swarms of dartfighters immediately broke contact from the scrum and headed back towards their motherships. Erin had brought the GA force precious few minutes it needed.
In the meantime, Syal swerved around the erupting vessel, keeping course on her initial target. In her aft sensors she could see a brilliant ball of light consume the ship and swallow several smaller surrounding vessels close by.
Almost numb, Syal targeted her lone warhead, a heavy rocket, onto the Nebulon-B modular bridge of the ship ahead. The Jedi kept her bobbing and swerving, but at the same time locked on her target. Almost uncaringly, she fired her missile, letting the Jedi guide her back out of the laser fire of the surrounding Killik vessels.
Her astromech blerped an update to the timer, five minutes left.
Grief turned to anger and Syal suddenly found a new will to survive. She was going to give those Jedi in charge a piece of her mind. For Erin to die in this uninhabited system so far away from her family, her home, for everything she had signed up to fight for, it was absolutely ridiculous.
If the Jedi didn't think the bugs were scary enough, they'd soon learn what it was like to have an Antilles go at them.
-)[-V-](-
"Who was it! The idiot who came up with that battle plan?"
Jysella heard the angry Corellian long before she saw her. Having come aboard the *Dodanna* to brief Admiral Bres-Durron about their next moves, the Corellian Jedi was hardly surprised. Though the previous battle had been something of a success, the entire bug-fleet vaped, the GA force had lost half their fighter compliment buying enough time to do so.
The doors to Admiral Bres-Durron's office opened with a hiss, and the irate Corellian stormed in her face showing equal parts grief, fury, murderous rage, and sadness.
The red-haired admiral not so helpfully pointed to Jysella. "Jedi Knight Horn was the one who chose the battlefield, *Lieutenant*."
"Ma'am," Syal came to a stop and snapped off a salute. "Permission to speak very freely?"
"I'll make it easier for you, Lieutenant. I have to go take stock of what forces we have left, feel free to be as liberal with your opinion to Jedi

Knight Horn as you want. The Force knows I've already given her a piece of my mind."
Jysella kept her own face impassive. The argument with the admiral already moot in her mind. What had happened had happened. The galaxy was now without almost a million bugs and it was only at the cost of a couple dozen pilots. She met the pilot's eyes dispassionately, having no sympathy for someone who couldn't see the bigger picture.
"Before you start, Lieutenant, I don't for a moment regret any of the lives lost," Jysella said coldly. "We've all signed up to protect the rest of the galaxy, at the cost of our lives if we have to, and I don't know how many friends or acquaintances you may have just lost, but compared to the innumerable thousands they took out with them, you should be proud."
The slap Syal threw never landed, Jysella catching the pilot's wrist centimeters from her cheek. That only made the blonde pilot seethe.
"You high and mighty Jedi. Are us grunts and flyboys just pawns for you? Pieces you move around because the formation makes the galaxy look better? And for your information, my friend's name was Erin Dodanna! And she just died because your half-assed planned focused only on killing bugs and not on getting the rest of us out of there."
"Yes," Jysella answered sharply. "You *are* pawns in this game. I don't know if you ran the numbers, but *none* of you should have survived the battle, but you did because we Jedi did *our* damned best to get as many of you back as possible. We're not gods, we can't save everyone, but until some other person comes along and wants to volunteer for this, we're all you have. Half-assed plan? This is war, soldier. People will die, even if they have a famous last name. You should be grateful that we even had the resources to last this long. You want to talk about numbers? You've been sent out on over a dozen combat missions since we started this interdiction. This is the first mission that's lost so many people, but also the first to annihilate an entire fleet group. So if you want to sit in the hot-seat and plan for how your friends are going to die, then do so. Until then, shut up and follow orders. It's always easier to criticize than create solutions, so by all means. How else shall we slow down a bug-fleet bent on wanton destruction and murder?"
"We are not tools, pawns on some dejarik board!"
"Yes, yes, you are," Jysella said dispassionately. "You think I give a damn about whether you live through the next fight or not? All of us, me included, are going to die some time. The only question is how and when. How much of a difference will our deaths make and when's the best time to exchange our life for the life of the enemy we're fighting? We're out here to give everyone waiting back at Ilum and Geroon a

fighting chance. *Not* to look pretty for whatever victory parade we'll get when we return. You're angry, I get it. But use that anger and vape more bugs. It's their fault we're out here anyways."
Syal regarded Jysella impassively. "You really have a crummy way of viewing life, ma'am."
"What, you thought all of us Jedi were enlightened? Hate to disappoint you," Jysella replied darkly. "Now rest up and get ready. Your sister has already sent in another intel packet, another target."
-)[-VI-](-
It almost seemed pointless to Jysella as she paced back and forth on the YT-5100 *Shriek*-class Corellian bomber. A vessel some brilliant politician and Corellian Engineering Corp executive thought to name the '*Valin Horn'* in hopes of getting on the good side of the Jedi. Almost like a YT-1300 in shape and design, said politician and executive figured that naming a ship meant for war, for exterminating living beings, fit Valin Horn's personality almost poetically.
Sadly Jysella's father wouldn't let her meet said executive and politician, nor would he set up a holo-conference so she could roast their minds from afar.
But just being on the ship highlighted the seemingly improbable task the few dozen fighters and support vessels had before them. Pick off any straggling Killik vessels, keep the Killiks from establishing colonies, all the while trying to preserve as many of the strike-team's lives as possible. The last goal wasn't progressing too well, but at the same time they *had* managed to keep the Killiks from expanding off their planned route.
A carrier, a frigate, and mostly fightercraft, versus the innumerous hundreds of analogous vessels the Killiks had at their disposal. Definitely odds only a Corellian…or insane Jedi…would take on.
"Must you think so loudly?"
Jysella rolled her eyes at the older Jedi on board. 'Hero of the Rebellion era' Jedi Master X-2, her Ossus-provided babysitter to make sure she didn't go all 'Sith lady' in her quest to avenge her brother. Of course, officially he was the Jedi-coordinator of Gray, FireSpar, and VibroSword squadron. Squadrons made up of Aleph-interceptors, Chase-X's, and Eta-Fives respectively, one half of their strike-team's fighter capabilities. Nearing sixty years of age, the Jedi Master's tactical mind was still sharp as ever and Jysella had to admit that their previous few victories would have been impossible without him.
He had been the brains behind the whole 'blow up a sun' mission, had fueled their hit-and-run strategies with his experience from the Rebellion era. Had been invaluable with his battle-meld abilities.

Even then…the unspoken two-ton pink bantha in the room was obvious. Unofficially, there was no doubt that X2 was there to wag his calloused finger at her if she started showing dark-side tendencies.
"Must you meditate in the center of the ship?" Jysella replied sharply, not feeling particularly respectful given the stress of the mission and her current bottled up feelings.
"I could of course meditate in my quarters," X-2 said mildly, and then left it at that, making no effort to move.
"Quote me one of those lines about a Jedi needing to be calm, I dare you," Jysella muttered under her breath, storming off towards the cockpit.
Despite the odds, the taskforce had managed to eke out a string of small victories. A Shard cruiser here, a frigate there, sometimes more than one ship at a time. And in that rare occasion that reduced their combat abilities by a half, an entire fleet group. The Jedi meld continued to invite the Killiks over to Geroon and Ilum, and the fleet had otherwise happily obeyed the call.
But now came a much harder part. One of the systems in the break-away fleet's path had been uncharted—being in the 'Unknown Region' it would have been hard for even the Jedi to 'know' about it in advance—and unfortunately contained a high amount of mineral resources in its asteroid belt. A rather sizable force of a couple dozen capital ships had been dispatched to set up shop in the system. Said system was connected to several *other* hyperspace routes out of the Unknown Region and could be used as a staging ground should the Killiks establish themselves.
And Jysella had to find a way to stop this with the dwindling and damaged forces left under her command.
There was a reason Jysella liked to keep her battles planet-side or in diplomatic offices.
She released a breath and looked out the cockpit window. All around was a never-ending vista of clouds of different colored gas swirling about in hundred kilometer winds. The gaseous moon of a gas giant, the strike-team's only cover in a system otherwise occupied by the bugs. The window to dislodge the Killiks was shrinking by the second. If the insects felt safe to set up roots, then they'd be impossible for the small team to remove.
"You're thinking too loud, Jedi Horn," the third Jedi on the ship said softly, seated in the leather-lined co-pilot's chair.
"Can you blame me, Tiu?" Jysella said wryly, glancing at her brother's apprentice. "We're facing a situation we knew would happen, known

about the possibility for weeks, and we still can't come up with anything that won't get us all killed."
"Would a plan that gets only some of us killed suffice?" Tiu said, her voice devoid of emotion and full of logic.
"It's better than what we have right now." Jysella answered. Before the whole Killik mess started, she might have balked at so carelessly sacrificing lives, trading one life for another. Now, now she just didn't care. If the galaxy wasn't going to care about her own family, to heck with it all. If people needed to die to get the war over with, then so be it.
Tiu regarded Jysella with her usual analytical gaze. "And if such a plan called for my death?"
Jysella raised an eyebrow. "Will it have to?"
"If I was the only one who could calculate the necessary timing to pull it off, yes."
"We couldn't leave it to a droid or a remote timer?"
"Droids and mechanics can break down, the bugs could get to it," Tiu reasoned. "Jedi Horn. My master gave it his all to save those under his command, to ensure that the Killiks in Hapes were stopped in their tracks. It would be a poor reflection of what he has taught me if I don't at least try to endeavor to do the same."
Annoyed by the situation, Jysella folded her arms in front of her and raised an eyebrow "So, what's the plan?"
Tiu brought up an image of the latest sensor readings. "The Killiks are massing in the center of the asteroid belt, clinging to the individual rocks like fleas or ticks. They are all clustered across a hundred-kilometer stretch of the belt, around a grouping of larger rocks that are large enough to have a slight gravitation pull of their own."
"I read the same report, Tiu."
The Omwati teen changed approaches. "When a scatter gun goes off, it's so lethal because its rounds shoot out in a spread and can perforate many targets as opposed to one."
"The point, Tiu."
"We use the asteroids as scattershot, focusing our fire not on the Killik vessels but on the rocks all around them."
"Still not seeing where we lose…"
The comm line chimed, startling both Jedi.
"Jedi Knight Horn here," Jysella said, pressing the button on the console.
"*Jedi Horn, you are not going to believe this, we're receiving a transmission from the Killiks."*

Jysella and Tiu gazed at each other with wide eyes at the news Admiral Kadra Bres-Durron delivered.
"What?" Jysella managed to say not so eloquently. "How did they detect us? I thought the gravity of the gas giant and all the ionized weather obscured their sensors."
"*I don't think they've picked us up. The Killik hive is broadcasting on an open channel to all the planetary bodies in the system. We only picked it up because it was piggy-backing on a signal of our stealth probes."*
"Might as well play the message," Jedi Master X2 said, joining to two younger women in the cockpit.
A second later and a distant-sounding voice filled the cockpit.
"*We are Saras. We are eager to trade with those of this galaxy. We offer duty-free exchange and value most raw materials with which to weave. Please reveal yourselves, we do not wish conflict. We merely wish to trade, we delight in the star-song of crafting and will weave whatever you desire should you wish to barter with us."*
Jysella could only stare blankly at the comm-panel. "Bug civilians…no kirffin' way."
"If they come in peace, maybe we should attempt to reason with them," X2 said evenly. "Not every battle need be won by lasers and missiles."
"Are you kidding, master?" Jysella said incredulously. "Those bugs came with the main fleet, broke off and set up on a hyperspace lane that gives them prime access to other areas of the greater galaxy."
"And if we can convince them to leave peacefully?"
"How? Offer them another planet to live on? Let them ruin someone else's world? No, the only way we can stop the bugs is if we show them that they're not welcome in this galaxy."
"And the alternative is to open fire? They outnumber, outgun, and have an entrenched position in unfavorable territory," X2 reasoned. "It is better to see if they are open to conversation…"
"Conversation!? They're bugs! They eat other beings, brainwash people into their way of thinking. They think burning this galaxy is a *good* thing," Jysella protested, squeezing her forearms as she kept her arms folded in front of her. "What's there to converse about?"
"Master Exe-Two has a point, Jysella," Tiu murmured. "As much as I would hate to do this, we can actually save more lives if we learn about this hive. You saw the briefing the Solos gave, the Killiks are different with every hive. If these Killiks don't want to fight, then let's keep it that way."
She stiffened. "Fine, but this is a mistake."

After almost an hour later, Jysella, followed by Tiu and a pair of soldiers were loaded up onto an assault shuttle and approaching a large asteroid in the center of the Killik formation. The Killik ships all appeared to be anchored to varying sizes of spacerock all around, looking a lot like ticks or lampreys depending on the make of the ship. What the Killiks didn't know was that in addition to the soldiers and Jedi onboard, the rest of the shuttle was packed with enough explosives to take out a capital ship all on its lonesome. Detonated in the right place, and the explosion could do so much more. This was, of course, a Plan B, as those on the shuttle had no desire to detonate it while in the blast radius…in the middle of an asteroid field.

Jysella kept her lips pursed, her Jedi reflexes allowing them to navigate the unpredictable swirling masses of spacerock all around them.

"*We see you and welcome your trade. Please dock in the exterior of the asteroid the hive-ship is docked on,"* a voice with Imperial accents and creepy bug-like qualities sounded over the comm. "*We are scent marking the appropriate berth, reduce speed to one-fifth throttle."*

"Reducing speed," Jysella heard Tiu reply, the Omwati dialing down the appropriate switches as Jysella swerved around several spinning rocks.

The shuttle docked in a recently hollowed out crevice in the large asteroid. From the cockpit window, Jysella could see a large gathering of people waiting for them. There were humans, Chiss, Ssi-ruu, and so many other races that the hangar could have been the city streets of Denon or pre-war Coruscant. Some were even waving in welcome or holding up various goods as if they didn't know or care that the transport was combat-ready and not a harmless merchant ship.

Keeping her face emotionless despite the baffling display before her, Jysella descend the shuttle ramp in front of three of the others with her. The entire team was wearing breath-masks, as it was clear from the blacked-out eyes of everyone in the hangar that all present were Joiners. Apart from Tiu, the other two members of their team were Corellian Defense Force soldiers clad in their red, leather uniforms.

"Welcome, welcome, we apologize for the state of the asteroid but Saras has only just begun to move in," a Joiner said, showing more emotion than Jysella was used to seeing from a Joiner.

"Right," Jysella answered back, her eyes sweeping the hangar and hand resting atop her lightsaber.

Another Joiner, a Duros, spoke in the same bright voice. "Please, put away your weapons, you won't need them here. We of Saras simply wish to trade."

"You have several dozen warships outside, I don't think so."

"The warships are not of Saras," a third Joiner said conversationally. "They are of other nests wishing to trade with Saras. Saras has no warships, has no need of them. We go where the trade goes."
"Please, this way," three human Joiners gestured as one. "We will take you to where we have set up the bazaar. When complete the entirety of this asteroid will house the fabrication units of Saras and be a marketplace all will wish to come to."
"I only see Joiners, where are the bugs?" one of the Corellian soldiers said loudly.
The Joiner next to him just cocked her head to the side. "Saras did not want to off-put you by greeting you with anyone other than our Joiners. If meeting us will better facilitate trade, then we can have some of Saras stop crafting and negotiate through them."
The Corellian cleared his throat. "Errr…no, that's okay….thanks."
Jysella followed their guide, noting clearly that none of the Joiners were armed, or even looked as if they had any military training. "What is Saras' role in the Kind?"
"We trade, we craft," what looked like a mother, father, and young son family unit answered in eerie unison. "All of Saras travels the stars harvesting and crafting, sharing our song-craft with those who wish to exchange with us."
"And what do you craft? Weapons? Ships?"
"No," one of their Joiner guides gestured to an intricate tapestry being put up by several others. "We weave, spin-glass, clothes, pictures. We weave tales of times long past, compose star-songs to last millennia. We are the crafters of the Kind."
The family unit spoke once more. "Before we were Joined we were merchants who sought only to enrich ourselves. When we had heard rumors of the wonders crafted by Saras, we set out to view them, and upon seeing them had no wish to leave."
"We are only limited by the imagination of our Joiners," another guide, wearing a woven vest with complex embroidery, said cheerfully. "Speaking of, you are a Jedi are you not? Would you care to Join with us, perhaps enabling us to see the Force and weave an everlasting tribute to it."
"I'll pass," Jysella said flatly, her eyes catching sight of something as the group was led into a large cavern. "Are those pieces of armor?"
"Yes, commissioned by Iesei. They are the finest of armor pieces of course, as Saras will produce nothing but the best."
"You're supplying the bugs that are waging war on the galaxy?" The second Corellian soldier said darkly. All around Joiners continued to dig at the asteroid's inside, making the cavern even greater in size.

The Joiners looked at him in confusion. "Saras only fulfills the order given. Iesei traded several dozen metric tons of raw-material in exchange for armor that would protect a hundred-thousand of their Joiners and warriors. What is this war you speak of?"
"You can't be serious," Jysella gaped. "The rest of the Killiks, they're murdering and ruining the lives of trillions because they're crazy!"
The lead Joiner guide, a middle-aged Zabrak, tilted his head in confusion. "We care not of war. Saras does not fight, but we are eager to trade."
"I don't think we'll get much further, Jysella," Tiu said softly. "These Saras seem to be almost child-like in mentality."
"Ma'am, over there," the first Corellian soldier gestured to a stack of somethings on the far-side of the room. "Those look like pieces for dartfighters."
"I see it," Jysella grimaced. She looked to their guides again. "Those pieces over there?"
"Ah yes, created to the exact specifications of Mueum," the Joiners regained their upbeat attitudes at the change in topic. "If you'd like we can give you a sample free of charge, then you can tell all your friends about..."
"Saras," Jysella cut him off. "Those armor pieces, those ship pieces, even those powercores in that corner over there, they're all being used to kill people. The Kind is using Saras to produce *weapons*! They are killing off all your potential customers because of some misguided belief that something will kill them off later anyways."
The Joiners blinked again, then all of them tilted their heads up to the ceiling as if listening to something. The lead Joiner spoke again after several long seconds.
"We will offer you a discount then."
Jysella couldn't help but feel her mouth drop down in shock. "A discount?"
"Yes, we cannot go back on the commissions already entrusted to us by the other nests, we would damage our reputation if we did. To show you that we truly want no business in this war you speak of, we will give you a bulk-discount. Would you like tapestries, or authentic Killik-spun clothing? Perhaps a spinglass model of an X-wing or the famed *Millennium Falcon*, you are Corellian no?"
Jysella saw them wheel out several person-sized statues from another passageway, and did a double-take. These statues were exactly the same as the ones that had been in the Denon Senate Building, all had been full of assassin bugs that would have slaughtered much of the Senate if it hadn't been for Anakin and his family.

Stepping away from the Joiners and shaking her head, Jysella gestured for Tiu. "I think I've seen and heard enough. Get back to the ship and set the timer. We can't allow this Killik stronghold to get any bigger."
"Jysella," Tiu said softly. "The Joiners, look, many of them are children, families."
"And how many more children and families are going to suffer if Saras keeps helping out the Kind? We can't save everyone Tiu," Jysella looked around in disgust. "And from the sounds of it, most of these people *chose* to become bug-huggers. If they'd rather pretend that everything was all rainbows and happiness, and not stop the bugs from killing off their families, friends, homeworlds, then they're better off dead."
"But…"
"There are nearly three dozen bug capital ships around this rock. All from hostile hives that can create hell for any one planet. But they're gathered here like the Saras was some sort of tasty snack. If you want to think about it militarily, we'd be *stupid* not to take this opportunity to weaken the bugs. And if the Saras are as valuable as they appear to be to the hive, then wiping them out will severely cripple the Killik war-effort."
"Un…understood," Tiu breathed. She gave Jysella a calculating stare, then nodded to herself. "You are more like your brother than you give yourself credit for."
"I'd hope so, he taught me a lot," Jysella allowed a bittersweet smile to appear for a moment, then it vanished. Letting Tiu head back to the ship, Jysella addressed the Joiners again. "I am interested in trading with you. I've just sent my companion back to my ship to obtain the official authorization."
"Wonderful," the Zabrak Joiner clapped his hands together. "What is it you wish to order?"
"Fightercraft."
"We have model replicas of…."
"No, no, no, actual fighters," Jysella said, holding her arms apart as if to show them the scale of what she was asking.
"Saras does not make weapons of…."
"I don't want these fighters armed. I just want to pilot one of these Killik-made marvels back to my friends and show them all the wonders of Saras," Jysella said with a false smile. "Perhaps then they too will come and buy from you."
"If that is the case, you are in luck," a Toydarian Joiner voiced eagerly. "Taat has just traded us a squadron of their galaxy-designed, Taat-

made fightercraft in exchange for three hyperdrive-mounted asteroids."
"We are in luck then," Jysella played along. "Please, lead the way, we can discuss payment when I see the quality of the ships I am buying."
"Of course, of course," the blue, winged Joiner nodded. "What do you hope to exchange to Saras for a fighter or two."
"I have a good deal of credits…"
The Joiner tisked loudly. "Credits? Credits are no good out here. Saras need something more…something real. And no one else has Killik-made starships in this sector for sale, we can tell you that."
Jysella thought for a moment then smiled. "I'll temporarily Join with you guys. You want to see the Force right? To weave and carve and do all sorts of amazing art with it? How about it?"
The Joiner's black eyes grew round for a moment, then he nodded. "That is more than a fair trade, Master Jedi. You see, trade does make strong friendships."
Jysella and the two Corellians were led through narrow corridors, some with overhangings so low they had to crawl through tiny gaps in the asteroid's crust.
"And here we are," the Toydarian said, proudly sweeping his arms outwards to the row of docked TIE Advanced and Killik-modified X-wings. "Saras had not yet decided what to do with them yet, so we are fortunate that you are here. How many do you want?"
Tiu rejoined the group as Jysella readied herself. "Four."
"Four?"
"As I said, I'll show them off to my friends and they'll come back and buy the rest," Jysella fibbed smoothly, the Force aiding her speech. "Of course, I'd have to ascertain that these ships are in working order. Not that I don't trust the Saras integrity, but perhaps Taat wanted to leave a trap or two onboard."
The Toydarian blinked again, then listened again to the voice in his head. "That is acceptable. Taat has volunteered a squadron of its own fighters to escort and aid you should anything go wrong."
Jysella nodded to the two Corellians and Tiu and they each climbed into the more familiar X-wing craft. Clearance was given, and they started their ships.
As Jysella watched the systems light up, everything else seemed to fade away as the reality of what she was about to do sunk in.
But it was the right choice, wasn't it?
Valin, what would you do? Is this the Jedi way?
"Tiu, how long?"
"*Five minutes, we should probably…bug out now."*

"Non-Jedi, slave your nav-comps to me. Let's hit it," Jysella amped up the throttle and angled her X-wing out the hangar. Killik ingenuity meant that the four-winged craft was able to accelerate much faster than its non-modified kin. The four X-wings roared out of the hangar, breezing right by the waiting Taat dartfighters.
Almost immediately the dartfighters opened fire, but the Killiks had also upgraded the shielding system for the X-wings as well.
The four fighters streaked away from the giant asteroid amid a hail of projectile and laser fire. Jysella kept a silent count-down in the back of her head, glancing at her rear-view monitor as the time neared zero. The asteroids around them seemed inconsequential to the non-threat many kilometers away and growing. At five-seconds to go, she inhaled sharply, opening herself fully to the Force as she did. Maybe it was her way of punishing herself, or just a way of expunging everything she was feeling, but when the timer hit zero she wanted to feel every single life she had just sentenced to death vanish in the fiery blaze.
Five, four, three, two….
Sound didn't travel in space, the vacuum ensuring that no one would hear the deafening explosion in the center of the asteroid field. But there was no mistaking the exact moment the explosives went off. Her entire cockpit was lit up in a bright, almost blinding white light. Like the balls on a billiard table being broken up, the asteroids all around were suddenly sent flying every which way in the largest shrapnel storm possible. Nothing could have survived such devastation.
And through it all, Jysella finally released the breath she had been holding. With it over, she didn't know why guilt wasn't among the emotions she was feeling. Sure she had just obliterated several thousand Joiner lives, maybe tens of thousands even, and who knew how many non-hostile Killiks of Saras. But she had done so to keep them from aiding the Killik war-effort, done so to protect millions of others, to stop the Killiks from entrenching themselves in a strategically important system.
She was a Jedi, the Force willed it, she did the right thing. The reasons for her actions continued to rotate in her mind.
No use second guessing now.
Taking another slow and steady breath, Jysella keyed the comm-system. "Great job team, lets head back to base. Hopefully the Corellian Intelligence team already has another target for us."
-)[-Chapter End-](-

Unknown Regions
-)[-I-](-

"And let's begin the support group for the significant other of a Solo," Tahiri said jokingly to the other two in the room. Despite both of them being the 'reigning regents' of a combined hundred-plus star systems and the billions of people that lived in them, Tahiri didn't feel an ounce of fear or nervousness. How could she when they were among the people she counted as good friends, family even if the other Solos ever did get their acts together. "We can start by voicing a Solo trait that drives us crazy and say our solution to said problem."
Moff of the Chiss Sector, Jagged Fel, raised a dark eyebrow at the petite, barefooted woman in the egg-shaped chair. "My Solo happens to get us in annoyingly life-threatening situations and expects me not to worry about her."
Tenel Ka inclined her head, showing empathy. "We too have experienced this with our Solo, only We shall replace 'her' with 'him'. It is vexing to think that one person could worry Us as much as the many other lives in Our charge."
"Do you have a solution for that, Ms. Solo?" Jagged asked evenly.
"Uh huh," Tahiri chuckled darkly. "Get married, have babies, have a few years of blissful family-life. The whole family thing definitely limited the life-threatening stuff to about once a month instead of every week."
"Does it have to be in that order?" Tenel Ka said, raising her fine eyebrow in turn.
"Oh, right, you and Jacen kind of did it in reverse, so I'm not sure. But Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Clawcrafty still has a chance. Has Jaina asked you to marry her yet?"
Jagged cleared his throat. "Traditionally the males do the asking, even among the Chiss."
"These are *Solos* you're talking about," Tahiri stressed. "When have they done anything traditional?"
"Point," Jagged conceded.
"Let's make a rule," Anakin deadpanned, serving as the cushion in the egg-shaped chair his wife was sitting in. "Never let the three of them be in the same room together. They think they have a sense of humor."
"Hush," Tahiri rolled her eyes and leaned into him.
"I second that motion," Jaina raised her hand.
"Solos don't get a vote in this," Jagged said, matching Anakin's tone and trying to bring Jaina's hand down.
"Well if you marry our sister she'll become a Fel," Jacen said. "So her vote still counts."

"And you'll became a Djo," Anakin said to his brother with a smirk. "So Jacen's does too."
"Do the math, Dummy," Tahiri rolled her eyes. "They'll still be out-voted three to two."
"You're a Solo, wife. According to Jagged's rules, your vote doesn't count," Anakin replied back, giving her a quick kiss and then ducking away from her swatting hand.
"I guess we're hopelessly tied then," Jaina laughed.
Despite the momentary levity, the group in the room all knew the burdens on their shoulders. They were also aware of parts of the strategy the rest of the fleet didn't know about just in case they were compromised by Joiners.
While the rest of their allies were preparing for a threat from the Unknown Regions, a select group of Galactic Alliance Guard and Imperial vessels were preparing for the threat coming from the known regions of the galaxy. After all, the bug-light everyone was creating with their Force-call to the Killik Hive mind wasn't uni-directional. The bright side was that the Killiks in many reaches of the galaxy had packed up, relieving battle-weary garrisons and freeing up resources. The downside was that those Killiks were now en route to the Outer Rim-Unknown Region border.
Though expected, it wasn't exactly welcomed. Especially since the Senate had made it clear Anakin wasn't going to get any more reinforcements any time soon.
There was a squeaking sound and Tahiri shifted to pull free the villip attached to her utility belt. After a moment, she groaned and let her forehead press against Anakin's chest. "Why can't everyone just get along?"
"What's wrong?" Tenel Ka asked.
"A couple of Bothans from Yaqeel's group have challenged a couple of Loiric's Yuuzhan Vong warriors to duels to the death. You would think after I stopped the first twenty or so they'd get the message that Yun-Shuno really doesn't approve of them. This time it's the captain of the ship that was damaged in the training exercise and the leaders of the warriors in the smaller ship that did the crashing. "
"Now *there* are some people who shouldn't ever meet up," Jaina groaned in empathy.
"Are you going to do something about it?" Jagged asked, seeing that Tahiri had just settled back into Anakin's chest.
"Not a thing," Tahiri mumbled. "If they want to go full-stupid, I'm going to let them. Yun-Yuuzhan doesn't let idiots into the glorious afterlife anyways."

"Even if idiocy is contagious?" Jaina said.
Tahiri frowned. "Fine, Anakin you do something about it."
"Last time I tried talking to dual-happy Yuuzhan Vong I called them *kane a bar* instead of *kanabar*."
"It's okay, they thought you were macho posturing along with them," Tahiri slipped into the side of the chair and dislodged her husband. "Made you fit right in."
"You would think she was asking you to change Jayce's diaper or something," Jacen noted.
Anakin chuckled, heading towards the exit. "No, that I'd do so happily. Especially when the alternative is duel-happy Yuuzhan Vong."
"Hey you guys were the ones who insisted the duel-happy Bothans team up with the rest of the Vong fleet," Jaina said. "Quit creating more work for yourselves."
"It was that or we had to constantly keep an eye on where the duel-happy Bothans are," Tahiri said as the door slid shut behind her husband. "The Bothans have an independent streak that can rival the Corellians. If they were willing to break away from their *own* government, who's to say they'll even listen to any orders we give them. Better we keep them close at hand just in case a Bothan-sized problem becomes bigger. Besides Yaqeel agreed we should keep this group with us. We gave her all the moderates and peace-loving Bothans."
"'Peace-loving'?" Jagged spoke almost in disbelief.
"Well, peace-after-kicking-the-backsides-out-of-those-who-wish-to-kill-us loving." Tahiri said in one breath.
A comm-chimed, this time it was the communication's device attached to the lapel of Jaina's Jedi robes. "Solo here."
"*Ma'am, it's Antalia. My brother's returned. He has news.*"
"On my way," Jaina hopped down from the barstool and patted Jagged's knee. "You stay here and worry about other details, I'll just go find out more about the mean guys that want you dead."
"Always nice to have one less thing to worry about," Jagged gave her a brief kiss.
With Jaina gone, the remaining S-O-S, or Significant Other of Solo, all turned towards Jacen.
"I think Cuddles needs feeding," Jacen said dryly, reading the mood. "Enjoy the conversation."
"We intend to," Tenel Ka said with a mock regal tilt of her head.
And now that Jacen was gone, the mood grew a bit heavier. Jagged was the first to speak, looking at the two younger women with tired eyes. "They are taking far too much onto their shoulders."

"Agreed," Tenel Ka said without hesitation. "Tahiri, how has Anakin reacted to the most recent intel reports?"
"Like Anakin," Tahiri shrugged, her good nature disappearing. "He's not all knowing, but at least he's stopped beating himself over the head over things he can't control. The only thing he doesn't like is that we're going to have to sacrifice much of our rear-guard if the rest of the galaxy doesn't pitch in to mop up the Killiks heading from their direction. He hasn't reverted to full-Dummy mode yet, but he's getting there. We've…we'll we haven't exactly had fights, more like disagreements. This war is making him make choices he'd rather not and I'm his only safe outlet when he needs to vent."
"Jaina's noticed," Jagged spoke up in agreement. "Despite her attempts to hide it, I can tell that she is clearly worried about her brothers. And with the additional threat to my life, as well as the Killiks, the Jaina of the Yuuzhan Vong War is slowly making her reappearance. It is not exactly a change that I enjoy watching, and the frustrating part is that I cannot do anything to stop it. It is who she is at her core."
"How's Jacen taking it?" Tahiri looked to her almost-sister-in-law.
The red-haired regent took a moment to compose her words, her response carefully crafted like most of her speeches. "That is a complicated question. On one hand he appears to embrace this threat as a means to an end. On the other, he dreads it, fears what might come. His relationship with his siblings is unlike what Jaina and Anakin have in that he is more aloof with them. Yes he worries about them, but he is more concerned about the effects their actions will have on others than their own well-beings. The longer the Killiks drag out their arrival, the more distant from his siblings he has become. This war has also made him more withdrawn than usual, as if every day we spend fighting the Killiks is proof to him of some greater darkness that he must insulate his heart from."
"Do you think that is part of the Killik's plan?" Jagged asked thoughtfully. "To deliberately unnerve those leading the war-effort on the other side so that mistakes will be made."
"Maybe," Tahiri nodded slowly. "The bugs were hooked up to Raynar after all, and Raynar knew how Jacen and Jaina thought. Toss in the dark Jedi, and who knows how many psychologists they've Joined, and possibly. But I don't think so. The bugs don't seem the long-term planning type. I mean, look at the entire war. They've snuck around in the shadows making chaos, and the moment they're revealed, they don't creep around some more, they go all out. The bugs seem more desperate to me. But you two have actually led fleets, what do you think?"

"The bugs are far from conventional," Jagged shook his head. "Add to the fact that each hive acts differently, and it's unclear whether they are planning this or not."
"The Raynar I knew as a child was, with greatest respect, not a planner," Tenel Ka voiced. "And from the brief time we came to know Lomi and Welk, neither are they. Given that the hive leading the attack is now controlled somewhat by Welk, I'd have to lean towards the fact that they are unaware of how they are affecting the Solos."
"There is one way to be sure," Jagged said. "Lomi is still aboard your command ship, is she not, Queen Mother?"
"She is," Tenel Ka answered. "She has been kept under sedation and in a secure room in case there are some residual Joiner connections we are not aware of. The serum only deadened her Joiner connection but did not undo the years of change her brain had gone through."
"Do you think she'll remember anything?" Tahiri said, her expression slightly subdued at the thought of a mind being shaped into something it originally wasn't.
"Unsure," Tenel Ka shook her head slowly. She paused for a very long moment. "But…I will find out."
"Queen Mother?" Jagged said questioningly.
"Moff Fel, if we are to gain intel, then we must use all avenues available to us. If there is a concerted effort by the Killiks to undermine the well-being of the Solos then it is imperative we learn about it. After all, the three of them are leading this defensive effort."
Jagged picked up his Moff's hat from the table next to him. "Very well. In the meantime I will be shoring up the Utegetu Nebula with General Antilles. Are we certain that this is where the Core-ward Killiks are coming from?"
"Jacen and Anakin have been directing *that* group of bugs there, yeah," Tahiri nodded. "And while you guys are handling that I'm going to contact Saluup Fing, the guy supposedly in charge of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet, and find out what's taking him so long. Loiric is competent, maybe too competent, and the warriors here already favor his leadership over Saluup's."
"Good luck with that," Jagged said drolly.
"Yeah, thanks. Just how I want to spend my morning."
"The Queen Mother will be spending her morning with an insane, Joined, disfigured, dark-Jedi who might or might not be coherent enough to explain the plans of an intergalactic fleet of locust," Tenel Ka deadpanned. "If anyone we should be jealous of the Moff."
"Five words," Jagged said briefly. "Chiss, Vagaari, Imperials, and Corellians."

Tenel Ka inclined her head politely. "I stand corrected."
Tahiri just chuckled wryly at that. "Come on then. Let's go take care of the unpleasant stuff. Maybe we'll have time to have fun later."
"Optimistic as always," Tenel Ka said in agreement.
"Tenel Ka, the three of us decided that the Solos were worth all the anguish they put us through. We have to be optimistic or just the Solos alone would drive us Rhysode-like, never mind the Solos *and* saving the galaxy. Besides, someone has to counter all of my dummy-husband's negatude, otherwise Cassa and Jayce will grow up with permanent creases on their forehead, and I want to be the one with the monopoly on forehead creases."
"Then let us get started," Jagged said. "I for one agree that Jaina looks much more attractive without said forehead creases."
-)[-II-](-
Tenel Ka liked to believe she had a firm control of her emotions. As a Queen Mother she couldn't really afford to show any outside of mildly-amused or mildly-disapproving. She had many enemies, some she knew she deserved, others because they just needed someone to direct their insane hate towards, and as a figurehead she fit the bill. There were really only two instances she would ever show more than her queenly side, if you threatened her friends and if you threatened her family.
Given that Jacen Solo was both family and her first best friend, any threats to him definitely deserved her ire.
Then again, her only target at the moment was someone driven mad by the Killiks after already being filled with delusions of grandeur by whatever Sith had been her master. Add to the fact that Lomi was now missing both legs, most of her face—eyes, mouth, and throat—and Tenel Ka couldn't help but feel sorry for a woman who was barely a dozen years older than herself.
Staring at the cold metal door of the secured med-bay that contained the single patient, Tenel Ka marshaled her emotions. Lomi had been kept sedated since her capture, the med-droids working overtime to restore some semblance of the Dathomiri woman's original form. From everything else that had been going on, Tenel Ka had only read reports on the progress being made, but hadn't seen Lomi at all.
The doors opened, and she stepped into the room.
"Leave us," Tenel Ka directed the two-dozen heavily-armed guards scrambling to attention.
"Queen Mother, she…"
"Do as We say, captain," Tenel Ka interrupted. "We will be fine."

The captain saluted sharply, though her face still reflected doubt. These were, after all, part of the Royal Family's Royal Guard who were all born and bred to instinctively protect the sitting regent.
"We'll be right outside, Your Majesty," the captain said.
"The hallway will be crowded," Tenel Ka shook her head. "Take some time off. We have appreciated your vigilance."
Not one to disobey his ruler, the captain nodded and exited with the others.
The med-droid, a 2-8B model, rolled over to the Queen Mother and asked in Hapan. "*Chume*, how can I be of assistance?"
"Is the patient stable?"
The droid continued to respond in Hapan. "Yes. As you can see the prosthetics were successfully grafted onto her missing limbs. The vocalator has also been integrated into her throat so she will have full voice-functionality if you wish to talk to her. The optical implants are still being grafted and it will still take some time before she is capable of sight. I can provide a time estimate if needed."
"Not needed. Her connection to the Killik hives?"
"Judging from the brain-waves the patient is emitting, she still retains a low-level connection despite the serum's effects. Her frontal lobe and amygdale are drastically altered from their original state, while both her occipital and neocortex show abnormal readings in their functionality. All are recorded side-effects to one being Joined into a Killik hive."
"And her connection to the Force?"
"I am not qualified to answer that question, *Chume*."
"Very well, you may deactivate for now."
"Understood, shutting down."
Tenel Ka then went to another set of control panels and deactivated all of the surveillance equipment and protective shielding. Once the lights in the room were dimmed save for a floodlight over Lomi's form, Tenel Ka released a slow breath and approached the restrained woman with a calm that was to be expected of the ruler of sixty-three star systems. Lomi was shackled onto the table, or what could pass as Lomi. The human looked more machine than woman. The Killik sensory organs that had been grafted onto her head had been removed, replaced by ocular implants that glowed brightly beneath closed eyelids. The top half of Lomi's head was devoid of hair and covered in burn scars, the lower half shrouded by a prosthetic that covered her lower jaw. Mechanical arms, legs, life-support dials over her chest. It was as if the former-dark Jedi was the product of a science experiment gone wrong.

"You've been awake for some time now," Tenel Ka commented evenly. "It is just the two of us now."
Silence, save for the occasional beeping of the machines that monitored Lomi's vitals.
"Nothing to say?" Tenel Ka continued, her voice tightly controlled.
"The Queen Mother herself deigns to see us," Lomi answered in a distorted mechanic croak. "We are honored."
"I make it a point to learn about those who wish to take my throne." Tenel Ka gestured with a hand and summoned a chair to her. Sitting in it, Tenel Ka continued to regard the bound woman before her. "How much do you remember of your Joining?"
"You should have let us die. You Jedi were always too soft," Lomi answered. She seemed to grimace at the sound of her voice. With a gesture that didn't surprise Tenel Ka, Lomi's shackles fell away and the woman gingerly touched the jaw-piece. "This pain, the despair, it only makes us stronger."
"'*Us*,'?"
"Us…me…" Lomi shook her head as if to clear it.
"You are afraid," Tenel Ka picked up.
"No matter, fear only makes us angry," Lomi answered, realizing that the hand she was using was just as mechanical as her jaw. "And that anger fuels our hatred."
"There are other ways to live."
"What? Like a Jedi? Don't make us laugh!" Lomi's mechanical, maniacal laughter filled the room. "You Jedi are weak, so, so weak. You're so afraid of your own shadow you don't realize what's lurking in it until it destroys you."
"You don't remember much of anything, do you?" Tenel Ka said observantly, not rising to the bait. Compared to the nobles in her court, a frightened, isolated Sith's taunts were nothing.
"Should we?" Lomi chuckled to herself. "Should I…? We remember peace…We had a purpose…We remember voices, millions of them. All sharing our pain, sharing in our fears, our hatreds. It was glorious."
"Your partner, Welk, he is still among those Joined."
"We should care, why? He was a miserable excuse for a Sith. Always whining."
Tenel Ka raised a thin red eyebrow. "Your words say one thing, but your thoughts betray you. You are glad he is still alive."
"What do you want us to say, Queen Mother? We don't know anything about the Killiks' plans. Even if we did, we wouldn't tell you. The more Jedi they kill the better."

"Again, your thoughts betray you," Tenel Ka answered back calmly. "You remembered something."
"So what if we did?" Lomi shrugged, sounding tired.
"You *will* tell me."
"What, you're going to torture us…me…if we…I…don't?"
"No."
"What then?"
"Just the opposite," Tenel Ka said.
"Hug us until we give up the information?"
"You are a dark Jedi, you are probably allergic," Tenel Ka replied patiently. "My goal is to get information, not kill you."
"Not going to happen."
"Even if I make you a general on the front-lines?"
That made Lomi fall silent. After a second, she finally turned her head towards Tenel Ka. "What?"
"You are a Force-sensitive capable of reading the Killiks at a level most Jedi cannot," Tenel Ka said logically "You may be a dark Jedi, but I will wager that whatever master you serve probably won't care for the Killiks taking over the galaxy before they do. I will also wager that you are no more of a pawn, a foot-soldier for said master. I am offering you a chance to earn the respect of millions without fear or hatred, without pain or suffering."
"What?" Lomi repeated again. "Are all you Jedi crazy like this? No wonder we Sith keep coming back!"
"So you refuse the offer?"
Lomi once again fell silent, her face devoid of emotion but her Force-signature like a maelstrom of conflicting feelings.
"I am Queen Mother of sixty-three star systems," Tenel Ka continued. "The rewards for helping the Crown…"
"Yes?" Lomi said before she could stop herself.
"Would you receive similar rewards from the masters you serve, or a death-sentence for becoming a threat to their existence?"
Lomi fell silent again. Finally she swallowed. "You said Welk is still alive?"
"He is leading the Killik fleet poised to invade the galaxy."
"And you Jedi plan to kill him?"
"We had planned to kill you too, planned to save Raynar. Neither of those plans went accordingly."
"The Jedi boy's dead, wow. Who chopped him down? We bet it was Durron or…"
"That is unimportant."

"One of the Solos would have been my next guess," Lomi said acidly. "We bet it was that lover of yours, Jacen. You know he has one foot down the dark path already, don't you? He'd make an excellent Sith Lord."
"I am still waiting for an answer, Lomi Plo," Tenel Ka reiterated a bit more harshly than she had intended. "Will you consent to becoming a general in the Royal Hapan Army, to serving the Crown and all the benefits and titles that come with such a role?"
"We tried to *kill* you and your friends."
"That was nearly ten years ago."
"Ten years…" Lomi appeared to lose her train of thought.
"Answer this question. What is best for Lomi Plo right now?" Tenel Ka tried a different angle. "You can of course refuse to assist me, in which case you will spend the rest of your life locked up and far away from your compatriots. You can try and escape back to your dark Jedi allies, but they will probably not be as understanding as I. Or you can achieve all that you want with my offer. Credits, status, respect, a place to belong."
"We'll more than likely betray you when it satisfies us," Lomi croaked in amusement.
"Of that I have no doubt."
"And you'd let us…me, command your forces?"
"You did not make Sith Master by being incompetent. Your…unique… view of the Force will also mean that you will consider strategies that us Jedi might not use due to our morals."
"By allowing us to use those strategies you are essentially condoning anything we do. *Anything*."
"Again, you'll do what's best for Lomi. If you do something so egregious that I lose face, your own influence, power, and wealth will wane. You have no ties to Hapes other than what I will grant you so *when* you finally decide to move against me, you will be the least of my problems."
Lomi just chuckled softly, her eyelids fluttering as her mind tried to adjust to the implants. "You Jedi really are something. Naïve, weak… sparing someone you know will try to kill you later. You're going to regret this."
"Compared to the Killiks, Lomi, you are next to nothing at the moment," Tenel Ka said bluntly. "In fact there are many arguing for your execution, Jedi among them. You live solely because the Solos believe you have some use to them. When that use is over, what then? Will they risk turning the galaxy against them by shielding you if you have contributed nothing? You know the Solos, they are loyal to a fault.

Give them a reason to care about you and they'll move whole planets if you ask."
"You drive a hard bargain, Queen Mother," Lomi said, her robotic voice toneless. "Be a lap-dog for a Jedi Queen or be dust among the stars, like we should have been when the *Tachyon Flier* crashed."
"You Sith put much focus in controlling your own lives, do you not? What's your choice, Lomi. The offer is only good for as long as I am in this room."
The silence stretched on, the pulse-monitor barely showing any change as Lomi contemplated her choices before her. Tenel Ka stayed where she was, her own cold gray eyes sweeping over the Sith, her mind whirling with the possibilities she had just opened up. Would she regret this later, most likely. But if it meant saving Jacen and his siblings from future anguish, if it meant giving the Solos another edge they could use against the Killiks, then the price was surely worth it.
Was it?
"Welk…" Lomi started, then stopped, trying to organize her thoughts. "Welk is a dangerous addition to the hive mind. He is as ambitious as any Sith can get, holds great hatred towards the Jedi. If Raynar is indeed dead, then there is nothing in the hive mind to balance out those emotions. It may be a hive mind, but it was a mind first controlled by the powerful desires of myself, Raynar, and Welk. You asked if we knew of the Kind's plans, we…I…do not. But Welk is not a strategist. Presented with a locked door, an obstacle in his path, he'd sooner reduce it to dust before going around it. You should be grateful it is him, not myself leading the Killiks now."
"Your advice is appreciated. Heal as best as you can," Tenel Ka rose from her chair. "I can have you moved into a comfortable room should you wish it."
Lomi nodded very slowly. "That…that would be welcome."
Tenel Ka started to walk away, but then smirked with her back towards the dark Jedi. "There are no comm-buoys in range of our communications systems, however, so I regret to inform you that any message you might have for your fellow dark Jedi will have to wait until after this crisis is over."
Lomi laughed genuinely at that. "Daughter of the Singing Mountain clan, 'fellow' is not a word we'd use to describe them. Do not worry, *when* we stab you in the back, we will look you in the eyes first. Consider it a repayment of the kindness you are showing us now."
"A considerate dark Jedi," Tenel Ka remarked.
"We will be able to do the job you want me to if you send over any pertinent information for us to look over," Lomi said evenly. "Just one

question, Queen Mother. How many of your people are you willing to sacrifice if it means ending the Killik threat?"
"As few as possible."
"If that number is in the hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands?"
"Then that number is what it is, but only after all other options have been exhausted. I would be a poor Queen Mother if all whom I rule are killed."
"And what type of Queen Mother are you for letting us live, and letting me command those who trust your judgment?"
"One who can see that the galaxy is far more than just black and white, light and dark. At the moment our goals are the same. I will worry about your position after *this* threat has been dealt with. Recover quickly, Dark Jedi Master Lomi Plo. I would hate for my opinion of your abilities to be proven wrong."
-)[-III-](-
Jagged Fel walked a steady gait along the freshly paved runway outside the newly-constructed hangar on the planet Sarn, within the Utegetu Nebula. Standing at attention were row after row of Imperial pilots, most on loan from territories that neighbored his sector. Months of wrangling and behind the scenes negotiations had finally convinced the frontier Moffs of the danger to their holdings should the joint taskforce fail to stem the Killik tide.
But the ranks of pilots were not just restricted to the human species. The multitude of non-humans being 'moved' or voluntarily moving into Chiss space meant that several hundred thousand more people now had another home to fight for. Technically Jagged Fel's local militia, the nearly twenty-hundred non-human pilots in the hangar made up a sizable chunk of the pilots present. All stood at attention along with their 'pure' Imperial brethren, their black flightsuits—common to TIE pilots—modified for their physiology. Toss in another thousand Chiss pilots from the CEDF also on station, a whole host of Corellian pilots, and the non-human contingent was sizable indeed.
Tan Maarek Stele and General Turr Phennir, clad in Imperial officer's uniforms that displayed a fraction of their sizable medal collection, walked with Jagged two steps behind. Parked all around in parade formation were Clawcraft, TIE Fighters of various make and models, a couple generations of X-wings, and a full three squadrons of the more advanced TIE Starhunter model.
For a moment Jagged Fel had a twinge of envy and longing for those he was walking by. How he ached to be in the cockpit of his Clawcraft one more time, to go one-on-one with a whole squadron of dartfighters, pulling G-forces that would blackout most pilots. But given

the enemy, it would have been much too risky. So instead of being in a tiny target, he would now be commanding the engagement from the bridge of the *Eternal Dynast*.
"Impressive," Jagged said evenly to the two following him. "But are they combat ready?"
"That remains to be seen Moff Fel," Tan Stele said, his voice equally devoid of emotion.
"Flying a dogfight is a lot different than dusting crops," Turr Phennir added. "Whether the new recruits will keep their nerve is entirely up to them."
Jagged nodded at their words, stepping onto a lift that took him to a platform overlooking the gathered pilots. The trip up seemed to take an eternity as Jagged scanned the thousands of pilots below. When the lift reached the top, as one, the pilots all rotated to face him, heels clicking together in disciplined unison.
"At ease," Jagged spoke into a microphone. His image projected on two large screens on either side of him. "The intelligence reports have been confirmed. The Killiks who have thus far occupied themselves with the forces Coreward have abandoned their assault and are heading out here to meet up with the others. With the aid of the Jedi in our fleet, these Killiks have been convinced to travel via the hyperspace route that passes through the Utegetu Nebula. We will be the first and only line of defense for the rest of our fleet. Should we fail they will be caught in a pincer attack that will no doubt annihilate them to the last man and woman. You all have spent the last few months training for such an engagement, where the fate of not only your lives, but the lives of the entire galaxy hang in the balance. Trust in your squadronmates, trust in your own abilities. Capital ship support will be minimal because all available ships have been situated to repel the Killiks in the Unknown Regions. This means it will be up to us to hold the Killiks here."
Jagged let that information sink in, his eyes scanning the crowd of pilots young and old from on high. Jaws were clenched, hands gripped the hems of their uniforms, but no one made a sound. Normally one might be nervous speaking to such a diverse audience, but to Jagged, it was all duty. Duty made him a Moff, made him in charge of the lives standing before him. Duty dictated that he stay in the Utegetu Nebubla and hold off the unintended consequence of the 'greatest mind trick in the galaxy'. Never mind that the Killiks would be coming with everything they had, fighters, bombers, frigates, cruisers, carriers, and whatever else their hive-minded military apparatus managed to create. Never mind that the only Jedi holding the rearguard were all younger

than his own thirty years of age, or that he had nearly had only a plethora of fightercraft to hold the four-system Nebula.
It all boiled down to duty. He had a job to do, and as he had always done in the past, he'd fulfill it to the best of his abilities.
"Even when we are victorious here, because we *will* prevail, our job will not be done. The moment the last of the Killik ships fall to our guns, we will set course for both Ilum and Geroon to reinforce the rest of our forces. If there is any man or woman among you now who does not wish to take part in this endeavor, send a message to my office and I will excuse you. I cannot guarantee that you will survive, I cannot guarantee that this fight here will solve the many problems that plague the galaxy, but what I can guarantee is that we fight now for the *chance* for things to get better. A chance for life to improve, for the galaxy to fix its own problems like it has always done. We will give the galaxy reason to hope, a reason to once again believe that order and justice can exist in a galaxy seemingly devoid of such concepts. You fight not for the Empire, though it is the Empire that gives you the orders. You fight not for your family, though they are surely on your mind as you stand shoulder to shoulder with members of other families throughout the galaxy. All of you, you are fighting for the galaxy, for hope, for a chance to seize control of the chaos that threatens to ruin all that our families have fought and died to create. And if you should fall in battle, do so with the knowledge that you *have* made a difference. That you die in place of countless civilians, defenseless innocents who might have fallen had you not made the stand you made. And know that it was my greatest honor to fight alongside you. Now, the advanced elements of the Killik fleet will arrive in less than a month's time. Get to your stations, and may the Force be with you all."
As the pilots quickly broke up into wing-formations and fighter squadrons, Turr Phennir let out a chuckle. "Nice speech, Moff Fel. So much better than the 'do your job or I'll shoot you myself' boiler-plate Moff speeches. "
"Thank you, General," Jagged commented. "How is morale?"
"Putting all the pilots at your disposal in one place was risky, but it paid off. Seeing so many others with the same task has given them a feeling of unity. Even racial tensions have died away in face of what they'll be going up against," Maarek replied.
Jagged stepped onto the ramp connected to the platform and headed for his personal shuttle. "We are going to lose a great deal of them regardless of what strategies we utilize. Mines and starfighters are of little help against the frigates and heavy support ships the Killiks employ."

"Can the Solos free up any more ships?"
"They have to deal with their thousand –plus," Jagged said in negative to Turr's question. "We have to take on the several hundred. It's why General Antilles is currently giving a similar speech to our own heavy vessels."
"Good thing the missile shipments from Adumar have made it."
They took a seat within the shuttle and the door hissed shut behind them. A few minutes later and the pilot had them airborne.
"Sir," the pilot called out. "Message from Imperial Jedi Altamik via official courier ship parked in orbit."
Jagged activated the holo-table in front of him. "Put her through."
Turi Altamik's image flickered on. "*Moff Fel, Imperial Jedi Altamik. I hope this recording finds you well. The political climate back on Taspir Three is tenuous, with many of the staunch Imperialists calling for Grand Moff Quille to replace or recall you. Your initiative in recruiting non-humans into the Imperial Navy, giving them access to Imperial technologies, and also creating a loose alliance of the Moffs of the newly added sectors, has ruffled more than a few feathers. I've currently convinced the Grand Moff and several of the more outspoken critics of your ascent that you will more than likely die in the battle to come so they should adopt a wait-and-see approach. I just wanted to warn you that, should you survive, you'll have a whole set of political battles in store. There is nothing more I can do from my end. Good luck, and chin up."*
"Polite of her," Turr chuckled, shaking his head. "What are your plans for that mess?"
"As the Imperial Jedi said, I have to survive the coming battle first, General," Jagged answered dryly. "I'll worry about the Grand Moff after the fact."
"Fair enough. You still have the matter of several disgruntled Chiss governors threatening to revolt," Turr said, passing a datapad over to Jagged. "They feel you are showing preferential treatment to the non-Chiss members of the Empire."
"Alright," Jagged nodded tiredly. "I'll get my aides to set up a holo-comm conference with their Family leaders."
"Most Moffs would just have those governors replaced, or shot, or both," Maarek said with a dark chuckle. "Why go through the headache of trying to appease people who clearly don't appreciate the fact that they still have their posts because you decided to show the Chiss mercy?"
"Because if I go down the Tarkin route, I'll have more than a single system or two rebelling against me," Jagged replied jadedly.

"And if you go down the Tarkin route, you'd have a firm military grasp over the territories under your control and be respected by the other Imperial Moffs. Tarkin might have had to deal with the same politics, but he never had a lesser Moff overtly gun for his position like you have."
"He also had Emperor Palpatine and Vader's backing," Jagged said.
"Backing he had because they saw him as a competent and able commander of the forces at his command. He rarely took a moment to care about the feelings of his governors. If they disagreed with him, he had them replaced or convinced them to see the errors of their ways with a fleet group in orbit. I am not one to offer advice on how to be a Moff, but the further you try to be from Tarkin and similar minded Moffs, the less support you'll have from the center of the Imperal space."
"Tarkin never had to deal with a population that was mostly non-human," Jagged rebutted. "I highly doubt throwing everyone into labor camps will solve any problems. Nor will massacring the people I am supposed to govern. Tarkin, for all his laudable qualities, never did outlive the Emperor or Vader, or the many who fought his reign. History doesn't see him as a brilliant leader of a powerful military state, but as an evil murderer who destroyed Alderaan and billions of other lives. I am quite pleased to not be following in those footsteps."
"Then your enemies within the Moff Council will multiply," Maarek shrugged uncaringly. "And the ground you stand on will become increasingly unstable. If you think you're the first Moff to think the way you do, you'd be wrong. Only, all those other Moffs are now dead or members of the Rebel…Galactic Alliance."
"What do you suggest then, Tan Stele?"
"If you don't wish to compromise your own morals, then meet the Moff Council's expectations half-way."
"Only shoot half the revolting governors?" Jagged raised an eyebrow.
"You could if you desired," Maarek answered. "But I was going to say replace them with a human. Make the Empire more comfortable with the political make-up out here. So the title 'Emperor Fel, king of the aliens' holds less weight."
"Some of the families that governor the planets responsible have done so for centuries. There will be resistance."
"You can't please everyone, Moff Fel," Turr spoke up. "But what you can do is make sure you stay in power to protect who and what you care about. You can't do that if the Grand Moff removes you from your post."

Jagged fell silent, turning his gaze to the starry field outside the viewport. He was quite possibly the youngest Moff in recent memory with close to zero political experience outside of his dealings as the commander of one of many Chiss fleets. In concept, being a Moff was supposedly easy. Command people to do things, rule benevolently, stick to Imperial law. But reality wasn't so cut and dry. He appreciated the fact that the two elder pilots had stayed on to continue to train his forces. Both had seen countless regime changes and had a better understanding of what worked and what didn't. Even then, he often felt like a Mon Cal on Tatooine in his high office. The only thing he could do was push forward and hope he didn't get himself and everyone else killed.

-)[-IV-](-

There was a time Tahiri would have been terrified to set foot in a Shaper's lab. After all, as a young teen she had experienced horrors most people couldn't even fathom, ended up losing her old identity thanks to the more cruel side of shaping.

But that time was long past. Or so most people liked to think. The Yuuzhan Vong Shapers couldn't break centuries of tradition overnight, or even over the nearly eight years it had been since the end of the war. Though 'heretical' shaping techniques were no longer punishable by death, many Shapers were hesitant to go beyond the set practices for fear of invoking the wrath of the gods. Those that did often did so with little guidelines and even less moral restrictions. And unfortunately those that did were often the ones not on Zonama, away from the regulations of Nen Yim and the Yuuzhan Vong leadership. Or they were the ones most eager to go back to war.

After her villip call with Saluup Fing, whom Tahiri had learned was making a beeline to Bothawui and couldn't be dissuaded to alter his course, Tahiri had received another call requesting her presence. Knowing she couldn't do anything about the former outside of ordering him not to attack unless fired upon first, Tahiri left the choir chamber and took a shuttle to her current location.

"[You called for me, Master Shaper?]" Tahiri said in Yuuzhan Vong. The shaper's damutek was one grown rapidly on a planet in the Tenupe system, located within the Utegetu Nebula.

"Yes, She-Who-Was-Shaped," the Master Shaper said almost eagerly in Basic.

Tahiri did her best not to grimace. Eager Shapers rarely accompanied good news. "What do you need?"

"I wish to show you the fruits given to us by Yun-Ne'Shel, a breakthrough in combating this formidable enemy who seeks to

destroy all in its path. It is thanks to the Yun'o that they have seen fit to show us the weakness of our enemy and enabled us to lay them low. It is the honor of Domain…"
Tahiri held up a hand. "The point, Master Shaper Ou'dan Dal."
"Yes, your Eminence. This way." The Master Shaper eagerly rubbed his hands together and offered a series of half-bows as he gestured to the rooms further within the compound.
Tahiri did as bidden, not liking that the Force was telling her something was wrong. She was in a Yuuzhan Vong compound so there was no reason the Force should be telling her anything. Breathing through her nose, she briefly switched over to Vongsense, the world around her falling away until only Yuuzhan Vong organisms appeared in her sight. Nothing. With an annoyed huff, she reconnected herself back to the Force and silently wondered just what her adopted people had done this time around.
They entered one of the damutek's larger purple-coral-lined rooms, and Tahiri immediately registered the nature of the research going on.
"Are those…Killik corpses?" Tahiri said mildly, her eyes an icy green shade as she took in the tables upon tables of dissected insects. A few Yuuzhan Vong qahsa were even hooked up to what looked like pulsating, living Killik brains.
"They are, Avatar of Yun-Shuno," the Master Shaper said with pride. "Since informing us of just how dangerous they are we have devoted all of our resources into learning how they work. Master Shaper Nagme Kwaad's own research and development of the 'bug jammers' was also instrumental in understanding the way their minds function."
Tahiri just nodded, a fake smile pasted on her face. Some of the Killiks, though with their torsos opened and some organs removed, were clearly still living. Not to mention the live brains hooked up to the Yuuzhan Vong version of a computer. Somewhere in the back of her mind, the Jedi part of her knew she should have objected to what she was seeing. After all, the Killiks were sentient life and no life deserved having immoral Shapers mess with them. "Have you learned much?"
"That is one of the reasons why we have called you here, Daughter of the Gods," the Master Shaper beamed.
Tahiri felt her sense of foreboding increase. "And the others?"
"We have managed to decode the electronic and pheromonic signals used by the Killiks to communicate with one and other."
They entered another room, this one glowing with a soft purple light.
Tahiri blinked. "No, no way. Have you lost your minds?"
"Have no fear, Slayer of Tsavong Lah," the Master Shaper grinned toothily as he used yet another title Tahiri had collected. "These Killik

have been genetically modified so that they are incapable of producing the pheromones that cause the Joining of different species. Additionally we have altered their brains to accept commands from a yammosk, much like we do with the creatures you call thud and blastbugs."
Tahiri looked incredulously at the Yuuzhan Vong scientist and gestured to the clutch of eggs lining the room. "You're growing your own Killiks! How does that sound like a good idea?"
"Killiks that only the children of the Yun'o can control. Since the release of the Chazrach the Yuuzhan Vong have been in need of a reliable frontline warrior. The incubation time for our shaped Killiks is merely a galactic standard month and a half, with an additional month needed to reach battle-ready maturity."
"I'm going to regret saying this, but you know this how?"
"The eggs you see before you are merely the tenth batch we have grown since arriving on this planet three months ago," the Shaper proclaimed proudly. "We have close to two-thousand battle-ready Shaped Killiks ready to fight and die for our cause. It was a shame the attempts to grow the larger beetle-tanks were unsuccessful, it would have been magnificent to see indeed."
Tahiri gaped at the Shaper, making a mental note to institute some regulations for the shapers the moment she returned to Zonama. "So you've brought me here to show you this new army your Domain has made?"
"Indeed," the Shaper gestured towards a flight of stairs, and Tahiri descended it all the while silently cursing how something so beneficial could feel so wrong. The Killiks were killer bugs…right? They didn't care about the lives of the people in the galaxy so should anyone care about theirs? As she continued to muse over the present situation, the Master Shaper continued his explanation. "These Killiks are completely compliant to whatever order we pass on to them. In addition, they have been grown with a miniature biological explosive in their minds. Should we even start to lose control of them, a signal will be sent and the rebelling Killiks will be put down in an instant."
They stopped on the edge of a small drop-off in a cavern hollowed out by the Yuuzhan Vong controlled rock-eating grutchinya. The faint purple glow that lit up the edges of the room was a telltale sign of more Killik eggs, and the legions of Killik soldiers going through combat maneuvers showed the result of several months' worth of Yuuzhan Vong study and genetic modification. These Killiks barely resembled the bipedal warriors that the many Jedi had seen in the field.
It was as if the Yuuzhan Vong Shapers had taken the best physiological features of the Killiks and combined them with various other genetic

templates they had had on file. Each of the Killik's six limbs were heavily barbed and covered in a black lacquer-like material normally seen on rakamat siegebeasts and voxyn. The mandibles were smaller, but the sharp pointed teeth within dripped of black venom. The antennae of the bug soldiers also appeared to be modified somewhat, with surge-coral constructs wrapped around the stalks. Every living creature was living nightmare, and something right out of the Shaper handbook.

"Are they not magnificent, Pardoner of the Shamed?"

"They are something," Tahiri said faintly.

"I know that we were worried about matching the multitudes of soldiers the enemy can throw at us. Now we are just a little closer to that goal. If only the Killiks could arrive a few months later, they'd then face millions of our soldiers, gifted to us by Yun-Ne'shel."

Tahiri took a second to mull over her different responses to this fanatic obviously loyal to their cause.

If she accepted the contribution of his Domain, his Domain would rise in status as being the ones who helped to turn the tide of the battle. But she'd also be accepting all the immoral implications the project created. How could she, someone who had been Shaped and changed forever by Yuuzhan Vong experiments, condone such act on another being. How could she allow the creation of another slave-army, allow the Yuuzhan Vong of Domain Dal to return to the darker side of Shaping that had contributed to the downfall of their people? They had to win the war without losing what made them who they were. Had to win the war as Jedi, didn't they?

But then again, how could she not use these biological automatons? The thousand plus soldiers these Vongified Killik warriors added to the mix were a thousand plus soldiers they didn't have. These Killiks knew no fear, no sense of love or emotion. They were in essence biological robots programmed to do what the Shapers wanted. No one shed any tear about sending the YVH series battle-droids into the field. Though it might have been her acquired dislike of all things robotic, Tahiri didn't really feel all that bad if the battle-droids got destroyed in the process of carrying out their commands. These Killiks weren't that much different. Every species in the taskforce was contributing something unique to the fight, whether it was starmaps, tech, manpower, ships, or knowledge. How were Yuuzhan Vong biots any different?

"They truly are amazing," Tahiri finally said, smiling tightly as she did. These Shaped Killiks were tools, nothing more. Just like her lightsaber or a blaster, or a yorik-et. "I will look forward to seeing them in battle."

"For the *Jeedai*!" Ou'dan Dal clasped his hand over his chest in pride.

"Just one thing, Master Shaper."
"Yes?"
"When the war is over, destroy all research pertaining to these new biots. Detonate the charges in their minds as well. The galaxy is already frightened by the Yuuzhan Vong. But Yuuzhan Vong in control of Killiks might make them do something we'd all regret."
"You are wise indeed, *Jeedai* Solo. It will be as you command. I will personally destroy the qahsa that contain my Domain's research notes."
"Please see that it's done," Tahiri tilted her head slightly. "And then try to change your Domain's research goals from war-tech to helping to repair this galaxy. There is already so much death and destruction in this galaxy, but not enough people trying to heal it."
"As the Avatar of the Goddess of Forgiveness commands."
"Glad we have an understanding," Tahiri answered back. She wrapped an arm around herself as she looked over the Killiks in the chamber once more, praying she hadn't just made a mistake. Made the mother of Cassa and Jayce Solo into an unforgivable monster. But it was war, and she'd rather these disposable tools were destroyed in its fighting than her friends and family.
-)[-V-](-
Unlike before, the meeting between the Solos and SOS—significant other of Solos—did not take place face to face. They were now shoulder-deep in preparations for the expected onslaught of Killik forces and could only rely on the localized HoloNet relays between their spread apart fleets. Jagged was in the Utegetu Nebula preparing the fighterwings, Tenel Ka was with her forces over Ilum, Tahiri was with the Yuuzhan Vong fleet acting as a buffer between the Utegetu Nebula and the others, Jaina had joined the Imperial-Chiss-Vagaari forces over Geroon, Jacen was in deep meditation perpetuating the 'greatest mind trick ever' in a ship sitting just inside the truly unknown region of space, and Anakin was in a ship between Geroon and Ilum going through a Death Star's list of things to do.
To sum it up, they were *really* busy.
"*I understand what you're asking Anakin, but you ask the impossible. I need more men."* Jagged said evenly. "*A couple thousand snubfighters are not going to last long against the type of heavy cruisers the Killiks can bring to bear, especially if those fighters are going to be outnumbered five-to-one at the very least by Killik fighters.*"
"*I know, why do you think I put you and General Antilles in charge of the rear vanguard, Moff Fel? If anyone can pull it off it'll be the two of you. But the fact of the matter is, the GA Senate still doesn't believe*

that a massive bug fleet is possible and have refused to sanction any further reinforcements."
"*Is it possible to have some of the forces protecting the Geroon system to shift over?"* Jaina voiced.
Anakin shook his head. "*According to the reports Jysella is sending back, they're going to get hit the hardest. It's why I've been routing any ships that do show up to help to that system.*"
"*Then what of the forces protecting Ilum?*" Tenel Ka said.
"*No matter how you divide things up, Anakin, one of the three fleets will be holding the short end of the stick,*" Jacen said to his brother.
"*The Killiks will be here soon, your forces have been training to deal with their particular sector. To move them now would be detrimental to their readiness.*"
"*Like he said.*"
Tahiri tilted her head slightly. "Well, what about the Yuuzhan Vong? We're supposed to be the rear-vanguard for *both* sides, but if we can support the others, shouldn't we? I mean, keep in mind, you probably just told one of the most eager-for-blood people to ride the bench while the second and third-stringers get first crack at this invincible enemy. They just about had a mini-temper tantrum when I told them they'd have to wait their turn in line."
"*The Yuuzhan Vong are our strategic reserve. If the bugs don't show up in the numbers we're expecting, the Yuuzhan Vong will have to rush over to fill in any gaps,*" Anakin replied. "*They have some of the most battle-ready and dangerous vessels, but at the same time, the forces of the rest of the galaxy are already nervous enough. The last thing I want is for any of our forces to try and exact revenge over some war-grudge and blow this thing out of proportion. I'm hoping that when the Yuuzhan Vong come riding in to the rescue I can build up even more good will for them. Well, that, and whoever they're rescuing will be more concerned about staying alive than worrying about who's saving them.*"
Jagged visibly tensed. "*We will not last long then. The dozen capital ships you have allocated to us is hardly a match against the hundreds coming towards us from the rest of the galaxy. We are also limited in the space we can run about and will run out of tricks sooner or later. Even if we were to wage a hit-and-run style battle, we'd be forced to let the bulk of the Killik forces through."*
"*By then it will be a moot point,*" Anakin pointed out. He rubbed at his face and released a tired breath. Even over the HoloNet, Tahiri could see the dark lines under his eyes caused by many a sleepless night.
"*Yes you'll take heavy casualties, but at the same time, you'll also be*

preventing the other two fleets from losing even more people. When it comes down to it, a capital ship has many thousands of people on board. A fighter, one or two. I'd rather close to a thousand pilots die, then lose many times that many when a single capital ship goes down. I wouldn't have placed you in charge of them, or the handful of Jedi I've picked to help you out, if I didn't think you could get the job done. The Wild Knights were reassigned to your fleet for that precise reason. Besides, I think it's bad form if I get my sister's boyfriend killed by assigning him an impossible mission."
"*Very bad form*, *Little Brother,*" Jaina said sarcastically. "*In other news, the Chiss have another hyperspace-lane collapser ready to be deployed. Chances of another being made in time are nil, so we'll have to use this one carefully. Where do you want it, Anakin?*"
"*Send it over to Jagged's fleet and have them plant it in the Murgo Choke. If we lose out here, collapsing the Choke should buy the rest of the galaxy a few months while the bugs find an alternate route to the more tasty planets.*"
"*Roger.*"
"*Tenel Ka, how are the forces at Ilum faring?*"
"*Morale is very low,*" the Queen Mother answered evenly. "*Though we have managed to turn the planet into a venerable fortress, the scouting reports sent back by Jedi Knight Horn are damning to say the least. In the few months her raiding group has been active, they have destroyed hundreds of Killik vessels, yet report no visible affect to the Killik combat readiness. Added to the fact that the ground forces the Killiks are expected to land are in the tens of millions and many do not expect to survive the engagement.*"
"*Great, then I know just who to send your way,*" Anakin said. *"Mandalore Belok Rhal has sent over three hundred Mandalorians and a couple of Mando cruisers*."
"How'd you get him to do that?" Tahiri said in surprise.
"Not me," Anakin shook his head with a wry grin. "*Do you really think I have the time to chase down everyone who hasn't donated a ship yet? No, it was Doran Sarkin-Tainer and that apprentice of his. They still have some pull over there, and some pretty deep pockets somehow. These Mandos aren't here out of the goodness of their hearts, but on contract. I don't know the particulars, and Doran said not to ask. In any case, if anyone can get morale of ground soldiers up it's three-hundred Mandos. Doran's in command of the fleet by the way, so be sure to thank him personally when they get there."*
"*I will,*" Tenel Ka inclined her head. "*Friend Tahiri, did you not say you had news as well?*"

Tahiri winced. "The Yuuzhan Vong have also developed their own die-hard bug-soldiers to fight against the Killiks. I'll see what I can do about moving them from the hatcheries to Ilum."
"*Shaped Killiks*?" Tenel Ka said, her raised eyebrows her only show of emotion.
"We can use all the help we can get, right?" Tahiri said weakly.
"*Is now a bad time to bring up the problems on my end?*" Jaina said with a grimace.
"*Shoot, sis.*"
"*Given the odds against my part of the fleet, the Vagaari, Chiss, and Imps all want to blow up Geroon as a last-gasp plan.*" Jaina said evenly. "*The planet still has several million inhabitants that can no way be relocated given our time constraints and ship capacities. The Vagaari see the Geroon as disposable slaves, the Chiss see them as primitive beings not worthy of their time, and the Imps see everyone as aliens and don't care what they do to each other. And unfortunately, the plan does have its merits. If the Killiks overrun our position, by exploding Geroon we can effectively neutralize most of the enemy fleet in the blast. Of course it'd take out many of our own surviving vessels, but by then I doubt there'd be many of us left.*"
"And if the bugs do get that far, those millions of Geroons will probably be Joined," Tahiri added.
Silence filled the HoloNet lines for several long seconds.
"*Do it*," Anakin finally said, his voice carrying no emotion. "*But only when all other options have failed. We have to stop the bugs here or the galaxy will be plunged into a war that it can't afford to fight at the moment.*"
"*Anakin*," Jacen said in objection.
"*It's war, Jace. Sometimes hard decisions must be made, forget about if it's light or dark. If Jaina blows up Geroon, it's on me. If Jagged and his people are killed because I didn't allocate them more capital ships, also my fault. And if we lose this battle, then the rest of the galaxy will feel the effects of our failure."*
"*Stop them by any means necessary? The millions of lives on Geroon…*"
"*Compared to the trillions of others in the galaxy, the millions of lives in the fleets who trust us to succeed?"* Anakin shook his head. "*Morals are a luxury we don't have and won't ever have again if we lose this war. Yes I just condemned several million beings to death if Jaina loses. Will I do it again? In a heartbeat. Does it make me a dark Jedi, a Sith? Would it be any worse if I vetoed that plan and those Killiks went on to enslave dozens of systems and the billions within them? You wanted*

me to make these decisions, Jace, and that's what I'm doing. Your job is to let us know when the bugs are going to get here then mess with their hive mind as much as possible."
"Anakin..." Jagged interrupted.
"*I know*," Anakin said. "*But if I want all of us to survive. It's what I have to do.*"
"It's what *we* have to do," Tahiri said, glaring daggers at her husband. "You're not the only one fighting this war. The only one who has lives depending on them. We've all had to make tough choices these past few months, also care about you and what this war is doing to all of us, so stop being cloud-brained."
Anakin smiled faintly, tiredly. "*You all just make sure you survive this. Force knows what will happen in the coming months.*"
"We'll do our best, Little Brother," Jaina replied softly. "*Hang in there, this is almost over.*"
"*I'll do **my** best."*
Almost in unison, the young leaders closed their eyes for a moment, praying that the choices they've made were worth the price they would all soon pay.
-)[-Chapter End-](-

Ilum
-)[-I-](-
The Killik invasion was less than a month away, weeks really, but as on Geroon, the preparations on Ilum were ongoing. In essence, the entire planet was being converted into a giant, tasty piece of bug-bait. Mountains were bristling with turbolaser batteries, wide swaths of empty ground now hosted landmines of all makes and models. Networks of bunkers, trenches, gun-emplacements, and enough hardware to turn the planet into a Death Star in its own right were constantly being laid out. Thanks to the greatest Jedi Mind Trick in history, the Killiks were all but certain to grace the planet with their creepy-crawly presence.
Luring the Killiks to the planet was no small task. But those using the Mind Trick could entice the bugs to their doom with several factors common to most Joiners. One, nearly all the galaxy saw the Jedi as an order of mysterious, ancient, powerful saviors with abilities the everyday person didn't have. By designating Ilum as a fount for this power, the Jedi were essentially putting up a giant 'invade me' sign. Two, the Jedi were symbolic representations of the light side of the Force. Everyone from the Outer Rim to the Core knew that. And three, if the Killiks wanted to easily wipe out civilization in the galaxy, what

better chance to do so than to eliminate the backbone of the resistance in one fell swoop.
Which made everyone on Ilum—and by extension on Geroon and in the Utegetu Nebula as well—bug bait.
Four months of training, of drills, of trying to overcome not only racial differences between various defenders, but also the much held mistrust by the various governments contributing forces. Yet, from the ground-soldiers to the highest admirals, everyone knew that the odds were stacks so far against them it wasn't humorous. Most of the galaxy thought it ludicrous that a giant fleet of space-bugs was about to bring them to their knees and did the one thing it was good it, clapping their hands over their various ear-holes and humming loudly. It was hard avoiding the gravity of the situation when Geroon's contingency plan was to blow up the system's planets—some even wanted the system's sun—to cover a retreat.
As for Ilum's contingency plan, well, they couldn't very well abandon a planet so symbolically significant. Nor could they afford to stay and get the floor wiped with their collective rears, however. Even after months of racking their brains for a plan, the ones they had come up with weren't too favorable.
"You know," Zekk chuckled, tiredly rubbing at his face. "I've noticed that the more I hang around you Solos the more crazy and reckless I get. I can't believe you guys managed to convince me to stay behind."
"*For the record, I try not to make it a habit of sending family friends on suicide missions.*" Anakin grimaced, his own expression haggard and drawn. "*But with the main threat passed, hopefully the Killiks will just move on and you can then hit them where they least expect it. Keep in mind, this is just a Plan J, in case Plans A through I all fail.*"
"I know, Anakin." Zekk tried to smile reassuringly. "And get some sleep will you? It's just a hologram but you look like death warmed over."
"*So many things still need to be done*," Anakin shook his head. "*We still don't have enough people to back up Jagged's forces. Also, the governments in the Outer Rim are refusing to evacuate their people, or even consider it thanks to the dunderheads in Denon reassuring them that we can get the job done. To make matters worse, our scouting units and Jysella's strike-team are already engaging in light skirmishes with the advanced units of the Killik fleet. I appreciate the concern, Zekk, but I'll sleep when this is all over.*"
"Okay, but try to stop worrying about the team over here. Tenel Ka's leading the fleet, the Corellian Jedi and myself got the ground forces. This isn't our first dance with impossible odds."

"*I've had seven years off*." Anakin said with a wry grin. "*This whole do or die thing isn't really a fun thing to get back into.*"
"We got things under control here," Zekk said with a nod. "The shaped Killiks Tahiri sent over are integrating into our defenses without any problems, and the ground-forces are as ready as can be."
"*Good to hear it. Let me know if anything pops up outside of yours and Tenel Ka's control, the last thing I want is to have Jacen accuse me of abandoning you guys out there.*"
Anakin's hologram flicked off, and Zekk leaned back in his chair with a silent groan. He was well aware that the younger Jedi was a hairsbreadth away from going crazy with all the pressure placed on his shoulders. Was equally aware of how lucky he was that he only had to handle half of the planet's ground-defenses instead of the details of three different sector fleets.
Standing and pulling on his heavy, cold-weather parka, Zekk pushed open the door to his pre-fab command hut and out into the frigid tundra that was Ilum. The planet itself more or less had two halves—a snow-covered freezing side, and a rocky-mountain freezing side. The Corellians had the cozy twenty-below freezing half of the planet, he had the slightly frigid forty-below side. His only reprieve was that Ilum had very little wind—otherwise the icy air might have frozen his face off in seconds.
His emergence from the command hut did not go unnoticed. A heavily bundled Taryn Zel approached him, giving him a professional salute. They were, after all, in the middle of a trench filled with Galactic Alliance soldiers, protocol had to be followed. "General Zekk, the meeting with the higher-ups go okay?"
"Everything's on schedule," Zekk answered. "You're here early, Sergeant Zel. Did the dig crews finish the last bunker? They previously reported running into some problems boring into that icy mountain."
"Well sir, that's something I think you need to see for yourself," Taryn said, gesturing with a hand to the tram-car that would take them to the frontlines. "Trista and Alpha team is currently securing the site. I've had the dig crews and everyone else fall back."
Zekk tilted his head slightly, but Taryn had come a long way since the impromptu training session of Relephon and knew how to shield and deflect her thoughts from his cursory probes. Only, she had never employed those shields with him. "Is it dangerous?"
"Definitely a Jedi-related problem, Zekk," Taryn said, switching to a more familiar tone as the tram car took the two of them across the snow-covered ground. "The sort Jedi Rar told us to be on the lookout for."

Zekk groaned at that. "Dark side business?"
"Definitely felt like that," Taryn answered grimly. "Several of the work-crew decided to become homicidal and killed a bunch of others before the security forces could subdue them. But those forces then went crazy a few minutes later. After a few more deaths, my team was called over to assess the situation."
Zekk turned his gaze from the landscape to the Hapan warrior at his side.
"I'm okay," Taryn said reassuringly. "From the way I understand the Force, I think this is more a passive threat. Residual energies or something to that affect. In any case, there was a reason why the dig-crews had such a hard time with this particular mountain."
The tram came to a stop, and Zekk noticed only that Alpha squad was the only team on station. "Where's everyone else?"
"I had them fall back to the main camp with any wounded," Taryn said. "They've had less training against Force-related maladies and didn't want to compromise them."
"Right, so it's okay to compromise the rest of you," Zekk sighed, green eyes doing a brief once-over on the Hapan commandos he could see. All looked pale, as if they had a sudden bout of motion-sickness or ate something spoiled. He could also feel the definite presence of dark side corruption emanating from the giant bore-hole the dig-crews had created. "Well, you're right about this being a Jedi thing. How are the rest of you holding up?"
Trista saluted Zekk and fell into step with he and Taryn. "The training we've received keeps the edge off, but it is a very unpleasant feeling. Thoughts I try to not think about keep surfacing."
"That's the dark side for you," Zekk muttered. He took a seat on the snowy ground and stretched out his own presence. The minute he did, the dark side energies spiked almost violently.
"Whoa!" Chiri gasped, clutching at her head. She wasn't the only one, the others were all bent over, gasping for air. "Whatever you're doing, stop."
"Not a passive threat," Zekk managed, quickly using his presence to shield the others. "Something's in there."
"What? Impossible," Nyrani Lovett breathed. "No one's been on this planet for centuries, millennia even."
"Something has," Zekk remarked, rising from his seated position. "The dig-crews just woke it up."
Chiri gritted her teeth and charged up her heavy assault rifle. "Then let's make sure it doesn't stay up."

"Yes, let's," Hiana said, her voice uncharacteristically harsh. Enough so that the others looked at her in surprise.
"Hiana?" Taryn looked to the lieutenant. "Zekk, did the dark side…"
"She's using the alternative shielding technique," Zekk answered rolling his eyes at the normally sedate sniper. Leave it to one of the Hapan supercommandos to go the unorthodox route.
"Huh, alternative?" Chiri blinked, poking a finger into Hiana's shoulder as if testing to see if she was real. Hiana responded by sticking her tongue out at the heavy-weapons' specialist.
"You remember on Relephon what Alema said? You can counter the dark side with positive emotions or hide in the dark side itself with negative. A friend I know, Tahiri, calls it 'swimming in pain'. Cloak yourself in darkness so that it will pass you by in search of the light."
"Why don't we all do it then? If it makes us less of a target," Sergeant Kona Zhachi asked.
"Because it really isn't pleasant. And there is a very fine line between swimming in the darkness and drowning in it," Zekk answered back, looking at Hiana worriedly. "Lieutenant?"
"More negative to draw upon, sir," was all Hiana answered, her voice full emotion.
"So she says," Zekk said as if the matter was closed. "Now what was this about the dig-crews finding something?"
"A bunker of sorts, I think," Taryn answered. "Very old, but the ice preserved it perfectly."
"Okay, then. I'll go in and check it out, you can wait out he…"
Six pairs of eyes glared daggers at him. The other six, the squad's newer recruits, looked at him as if he had lost his mind.
"Come on," Zekk said to the commandos. "Dark side? Jedi problem? You all sent everyone else back because you knew this was out of their league. Sure you have some training, but this…to be honest most of your defenses are about ready to come apart and you're this far out of the cave. Will it hold up if you go inside?"
"You're not going in there alone, sir," the squad's leader, Captain Lovett said evenly. "Surely all of our mental defenses are not the same. Who is the strongest? Take them with you."
Zekk grimaced, but nodded and turned his senses onto the dozen women before him. The dark side aura emanating from the borehole made it harder to call upon the lighter side of mind-probing, so Zekk fell back on the lessons he had learned at the Shadow Academy all those years ago. After several tense seconds, he released a breath and mentally reviewed his choices. Of the three he sensed strong enough,

two were veterans and one was a newer member of the team. "Hiana, Trista, Lieutenant Skela."
He could feel Taryn tense up at his side, and then communicate something to her twin with just a brief s flick of her eyes.
Trista, for her part, calmly checked the charge on her blaster pistol, holstered it, and then checked the status of her collapsible polearm. "Good to go, General."
"Same," Hiana nodded, her sniper rifle unfolding in her hands.
The third member of the team, Lieutenant Ryadii Skela, was dressed in the best armor money could buy. Far from being standard issue, her outfit seemed like something only the most elite of elite arctic commandos would wear. Strapped to the holsters at her side were custom-made blaster pistols, electrum and gold plated. She was in her twenties, dark hair surprisingly kept in a style similar to Zekk's uncultured mess. What stood out when one looked at her face, however, was the fact that both her eyes were cybernetic. At Zekk's word, the noblewoman drew both her blasters and spun them in her hands before holstering them once more. "Ready, general."
"How'd Lieutenant Skela rate, sir?" One of the new recruits, Lieutenant Mirala Chell protested.
"She actually has the best mental barriers of the team," Zekk answered evenly.
"Really?" Nyrani Lovett blinked in surprise.
Ryadii tapped her temple. "Cybernetic cranial implants, allows me to process and utilize any information I receive on a level far above non-augmented individuals. My synapses also work faster than most, giving me quicker reaction time."
"Right," Nyrani sighed under her breath, shaking her head. "Forgot about that."
"Sounds useful…" Zekk said carefully. Despite being on the squad, he had yet to actually talk with any of the newer recruits outside of the Force-resistance lessons.
"Fifty million credits per augment, half a million for the operation to install one," Ryadii answered his unvoiced question. "I have five of them. Stun and tranq darts don't work on me, not surprised that neural tampering doesn't either."
"Wow," Zekk blinked. Once again remembering that he was friends with a pair of Hapan princesses who had so easily parted with a pair of Rainbow jewels without batting an eyelash. Despite everything he had seen he often forgot how easy life was for some people when they had credits to spare.

"Before you come to any conclusions, they were not installed by my choice," Ryadii said evenly. "But House Skela must be a grade above the other noble houses."
"House Skela personally funded five of the Battle Dragons in the Queen Mother's fleet," Trista said in a low voice as she walked past Zekk.
"Mining? Tech industry?" Zekk guessed, looking to the noblewoman.
"Medicine, sir," Ryadii replied nonchalantly. "Nearly all the medical facilities in the Consortium are owned by House Skela. All the reputable ones anyways."
"Sooo, family really wealthy then?"
Without batting an eyelash, Ryadii nodded, her cybernetic eyes glowing a light blue. "Obscenely so."
"Welcome aboard," Zekk said faintly.
Taryn lightly swatted Zekk's stomach so that he turned his head to look at her. Her jaw was clenched and her gray eyes stormy. "Stay in constant comm contact. We don't know what's in there."
"Yes, ma'am," Zekk tilted his head. He looked back towards the borehole. "We'll be back shortly. Keep the Queen Mother updated."
-)[-II-](-
The frigid air seemed to drop many degrees the moment the trio stepped into the borehole. The frosty white glow from the string of lights set up along the icy cave wall did little to make the situation feel any warmer. All around they could see the footprints in the fine snow, organized going in, almost chaotic coming out. Abandoned pieces of equipment and supplies were strewn haphazardly all throughout the passageway.
"The crews only managed to get five more meters in," Trista's voice was barely above a whisper.
"Hearing voices, are you?" Zekk asked gently, keeping his gaze ahead of him. "All three of you?"
"Affirmative," Ryadii said uneasily, her eyes glowing as she swept the cave with her enhanced vision. "I can see high frequency electro-magnetic fields throughout this passageway. But these fields aren't the source of the voices."
"The voices…Natural?" Hiana asked, her walk casual but her face haunted. Her grip on her sniper rifle was white-knuckled.
"The dark side likes to play havoc on the mind," Zekk nodded sympathetically. "I would try to shield the three of you, but I have a feeling that any overt use of the Force will only aggravate the source."
"Endurable," Hiana nodded in agreement. "Just not pleasant."
"Agreed," Trista's face was tight, her normally tanned skinned looking pale.

Zekk touched his earpiece. "We're approaching the end of the tunnel now. Dark side increasing in strength. Ryadii has detected electro-magnetic fields of some sort, unknown source."
"*I copy,*" Taryn replied. "*Status*?"
"We should be okay," Zekk said evenly, knowing what Taryn was asking about. "But will inform you if I'm sending the other three back."
Their soft footsteps along the frost-covered ground seemed abnormally loud as they advanced through the rocky walls of the tunnel. Ice was already beginning to reclaim the exposed surfaces, gleaming in the white light of the tunnel's illumination. The air stayed cold and unwelcoming, chilling them through the multiple layers of clothing, turning their breath into icy crystals against their mouth-guards.
"So Ryadii, are you the squad's new medic?" Zekk asked, trying to break the eerily unnerving silence.
"No," the dark-haired woman blinked.
"That's Lieutenant Chell," Trista supplied.
Ryadii looked to Zekk. "Why do you ask?"
"I just thought with your family controlling the hospitals and all…"
"There *was* heavy pressure to obtain a medical degree," Ryadii admitted. "But I am the only one in my family who has not."
"Does it have to do with your cranial implants?"
"Yes," Ryadii's expression darkened. "I am…cordial with the rest of my family at best. The *Chume* was kind enough to offer me a way out. I can escape my House politics but at the same time raise their prestige with my presence on this squad."
They rounded one last corner, coming to a stop behind the larger pieces of excavation equipment. Drills, lasers, and earth-movers all sat abandoned, some scored by blaster fire. Many of the lights in the area were shot out, casting much of the tunnel in pitch-black darkness. From what they could see, however, they could almost imagine the sudden mania that had gripped the workers and security staff.
"The EM fields have increased substantially. I can also see other emissions at different spectrum levels," Ryadii frowned, scanning the cavern. "They aren't natural in nature. Something has to be emitting them."
The quartet carefully began to examine the area, their gaze drawn to one of the larger pieces of driven machinery resting at the end of the tunnel. A large drilling unit appeared to have punctured a natural cavern, the drill bit still protruding into the air pocket.
"How is this for the source?" Trista asked, kneeling by the opening and running a gloved hand over the outside.

"Rocks should not have wires," Hiana noted, shining the tactical torch attached to her rifle.
Zekk leaned forward, running his hand along the edge of the hole the drill had made. Sure enough, the rock-encrusted circumference had noticeable, almost stone-like cables sheered by the drill.
"This isn't rock," Zekk whispered in amazement. "This is metal. Durasteel maybe. But old, very old."
"So it *is* a bunker then," Trista said. "How is this possible?"
"Maybe this thing is millennia old," Zekk shrugged. He activated his lightsaber and widened the hole for the group to go through. "Only one way to find out."
He winked at them and then dropped through the hole.
"Still alive?" Trista deadpanned into the hole, her nervousness well hidden behind her monotone.
"Yeah, come on through."
"Following a Jedi into mysterious cave full of dark side energies and strange emissions," Hiana said almost incredulously.
"Put it this way, if we balk he'll continue by himself," Trista reasoned.
"True. And if something happened to him that's bad for unit morale."
"Only half the unit, the new recruits don't seem to like me too much," Zekk called back up distractedly, refreshing his mental barriers. The dark side was strong, almost absurdly so since he had widened the hole, and it was now taking a conscious effort on his part to ward off its affects. He didn't even want to know how it was affecting the women with him.
"They'll warm up to you," Trista remarked, she slipped into the hole and dropped down to Zekk's level. "Right now you're a man who somehow has the respect of the Queen Mother and the squad veterans. They're puzzling how that's possible given the atmosphere they were brought up in."
"Agreed," Ryadii said. When she landed next to Trista, she turned her advanced vision towards Zekk. "But I respect the chain of command. The Queen Mother says you are worth listening to so I will do so until I develop an opinion of my own."
"How very forward thinking of you," Zekk remarked.
"Best education money can afford," Ryadii quipped, shining her own tactical torch back up at the opening. "I can afford to be liberal…and open minded. There's a reason my family sided with the *Chume* instead of the Heritage Council after all."
Hiana followed the other two commands down, her figure landing silently on the icy floor feet-first. The group took a moment to regain

their bearings, shining their torchlights all around in cautious curiosity. Once they saw no visible threat, they relaxed slightly.
Trista touched her earpiece. "Sister, we have found the ancient bunker that the drill teams dug into. We are going to investigate it. The negative effects of this place are definitely increasing, but we will endure for Hapes."
"*Affirmative.*"
"The floors are metal," Trista said. Her gray eyes peered into the darkness past the range of her torch. "But there's no power.
"A generator maybe further in," Hiana said, tapping the equally metal wall with her rifle, the barrel pointed to clusters of cables running along the top.
"There is definitely power running through those cables though," Ryadii commented. "So a generator is already running. Maybe a light-switch somewhere?"
"Stay close," Zekk said cautiously. "No telling what this place was used for."
They advanced slowly, their torches briefly drifting over side passages and rooms. Some of the rooms were blocked off by cave-ins, some frozen over. Ryadii gave them a low running commentary as they traced the power conduits closer and closer to their source.
"This place feels like a tomb," Trista murmured.
Zekk tapped his comlink again. "Taryn, we're inside the bunker and investigating further. Will try to find the main power generator and restore more functions."
No response.
"Taryn, do you copy?"
The three commandos tried their own comms, but with similar results.
"Perhaps the bunker is shielded from outgoing communications," Trista ran her hand over a nearby, ice-covered wall. The frozen liquid had preserved everything behind it perfectly. "This does not bode well. Jedi Knight Zekk, do you sense anything living?"
Zekk exhaled slowly, breath visible in the red light of his lightsaber. "I'm not sure what could survive for this long. But the dark side is much too strong in here. It's clouding my ability to sense anything further than my line of sight."
"All the better to turn on the lights," Hiana voiced, a strange note of fear in her words.
"Lieutenant?" Trista looked to the other woman.
"Increased mental shielding," Hiana waved Trista off. "Very unpleasant memories used to ward off worst ones."

Zekk saw that Trista understood what Hiana was referring to, so out of respect for the sniper he didn't ask what those memories were. Only, he could tell that neither Trista nor Hiana would be able to last for long if the dark side increased in strength any further. Neither would Ryadii if the way her hands were shaking was any indication of her well-being. Apparently even cybernetic enhancements had their limits.
"Someone's coming!" Ryadii suddenly barked, her blasters raised towards the shadows with trembling hands.
Trista likewise raised her blaster, resting it on her opposite forearm as she let the light from her attached torch wash over the hallway.
Zekk's gaze shifted, and he couldn't help but feel a small amount of surprise as a ghostly apparition approached. Highlighted by Trista's torch, they could see the figure emerge out from a nearby side passageway. It seemed to not see them at first, but then realized that it wasn't alone. The thing was, however, the figure was nearly transparent in nature.
"Do my eyes fail me? A Jedi?" The apparition, an Anomid dressed in simple clothes, seemed surprise. He looked directly at Zekk, ignoring the others."What is a Jedi doing on a Sith world?"
"Sith?" Zekk's eyebrows rose. He very slowly held his lightsaber out to the side, sensing no ill-intentions from the being before him.
"Hologram, sort of," Ryadii frowned, rubbing at her eyes as if she was straining them. "But the energy matrix is all wrong for one."
The spirit went on, ignoring the Hapan in favor of the Jedi. "Has it been so long already? How long have I slept? Lord Malgus must truly have fallen then, do you know if that is so?"
"I don't know the name you speak," Zekk said slowly.
The apparition appeared shaken. "How can one not know the Right Hand of the Council? Deemed betrayer because he sought to restore the Empire to its old glory."
"The Jedi safeguard the galaxy now," Zekk explained. "The Sith, the real ones anyways, haven't been active for almost thirty years. Even then, there was no council, only Palpatine."
"No council? So long, then. So long," the apparition looked about the darkened chamber. "So I see, the place is lost in ice, the planet reclaiming it for herself."
"What is this place?" Zekk said.
"A laboratory," the ghost said, seemingly gaining energy as he spoke. "One of the Schism Collective's finest... Our work….it appears that no souls has stepped foot in here for a very long time."
"I've never even heard of this Schism Collective."

"That is sad, sad indeed. It means that all of our work was for naught." The apparition's expression grew pained. "I knew that when the Wrath ordered this location bombarded, sealing us all in, that there was little hope of the Collective achieving our goals, but there was always some hope. It is why we all turned to research in our final days."
"Wrath?" Trista spoke, but as she did, she seemed to sway, reaching out to grip onto the nearby wall to catch herself.
Alarmed, Zekk looked to the Hapan women. They were deathly pale, their breathing labored. He quickly connected the dots and held out his hand, the Force shielding the three of them from the apparition. Said apparition didn't appear to appreciate that, and his face twisted in hatred.
"The Wrath! He ordered the location bombarded! Trapped all of us here! Families, civilians, scientists! We merely wished to find perfection in merging Force with technology! And we were doomed for siding with one who had the vision to let us work. Well the Wrath won't stop us now! We were successful! Force and Machine as one!"
Purple lightning suddenly erupted out of the ghost's hand, slamming into an unprepared Zekk and sending him rebounding off a nearby wall. Ryadii tried to raise her blasters but another blast of Force lightning slammed into her and propelled her across the icy ground where she came to a stop against another wall.
Trista and Hiana immediately opened fire, but their blaster bolts zipped harmlessly through the spirit. It did, however, succeed in drawing its attention away from the downed Jedi.
Focusing on Hiana, the ghost smiled crookedly behind its breath-mask. "Your pain is delicious. I must feast! Nothing will stop the Collective!"
Hiana continued to fire determinedly, her eyes wide as the ghost flew straight towards her.
"Hiana!" Trista yelled, watching helplessly as the apparition appeared to dive into Hiana's body. A split second later, Hiana's eyes rolled up and she collapsed to the ground. Trista looked to her House's Jedi protector."Zekk!"
Though his muscles were aching from the exposure to the lightning, Zekk crawled his way over to the downed commando. "Not yours." Zekk breathed, placing his hands on either side of Hiana's head.
The Force flowed around them, and Zekk suddenly found himself pulled into Hiana's memories. The same ones the ghost had trapped Hiana in to feast off her suffering.
Zekk opened his eyes slowly and gazed about the extravagant home he found himself in. The green glow outside the window let him know he was still in the Hapes Cluster, and that it was night on the current

planet. He heard voices, and his gaze was drawn to a scene in the atrium below him, at the bottom of the grand stairwell.
Two women in Hapan finery were squaring off, glaring daggers at one and other as they spoke with barely concealed venom. From his vantage point, Zekk could see a young girl standing silently behind one of the women, and a teenage boy standing behind the other. The woman with the teenage boy was holding out a scroll of some sort, waving it in front of the other woman's face. The other woman was yelling in turn, looking absolutely furious.
"*Unthinkable! Never! Just because you were incapable of bearing daughters…first Trisden and now your youngest?*"
"*It is a Royal Decree. To end these petty back-and-forth maneuvers, Ta'a Chume has decreed that our families, Roh and Gheer shall by united. Would you dare go against her as well?*"
"*Hiana is only ten! Ducha Gheer, by what degree of insanity would you think I'd ever allow my daughter to be married off to that scum you call a son? House Roh has always had a higher standing than Gheer, and I will not let you use my daughter in these political schemes to get ahead. Ta'a Chume or no! Besides, the Chume is Teneniel, and I will take the matter up with her."*
"Far stronger families have crossed Ta'a Chume's path. Will you leave your daughter motherless as well?"
"*I will not let you threaten me in my home!*"
"*Not a threat. You remember what happened to the last family who defied Ta'a Chume's wishes? Even the Queen Mother was powerless to intervene less she lose the support of the Heritage Council."*
"*My daughter is only ten!*" Hiana's mother repeated, her jaw clenched.
"*And I'm sure she'll have plenty of time to learn how to love my son then,*" Ducha Gheer said haughtily, like the predator she was she sensed her victory. "*Besides, she's developed enough. I'm sure the wedding night will be a memorable one.*"
There was a very long moment of silence.
"*Mother?*" Hiana voiced, panic and fear in her eyes.
Ducha Roh stiffened, unable to turn and face her daughter. "*I'm…sorry. But if the Royal Family has decreed it…I will try to appeal to the Chume herself…*"
"*Come, Ducha'da Roh. Say good bye to your mother. We'll make you feel right at home.*"
Zekk felt his own stomach clench as he realized what Hiana had meant about having more negative memories than most. He felt a surge of anger, as well as a bit of helplessness in knowing that he was seeing something that had already come to past. Quick as that surge came,

however, he suppressed it. Instead, he delved into the light side of the Force, surrounding himself with compassion, with empathy. The memory could hurt emotionally, but it was just that, a memory. He needed to bring light to the darkness.
He descended the staircase to where the two sides were. Calmly he knelt by the ten-year old Hiana Roh and placed a hand on her shoulder. The light side surged through him and into the memory. *It's in the past, Hiana. You survived. You're a kick-ass Hapan commando now.*
There was a flash, and Zekk found himself on his back once again in the freezing cold of the Ilum cave. Standing over him was a very angry Sith apparition, lightning crackling at his fingertips.
"Jedi! You dare! She was mine!"
Before the ghost could unleash a barrage of lethal energy, he seemed to sputter out, as if a hologram losing its integrity.
"Wha…not poss…the red-haired one! Nooo!" With an electrical fizzle, the specter burst into a wild display of electrons and then dissipated entirely.
At the mention of red hair, Zekk frantically looked around for Trista, but did not see her anywhere. Before he could call out, however, he saw the light of her tactical torch come from the same passageway the apparition had come from, shortly followed by the Hapan princess.
"Trista!"
"Good, it worked," Trista exhaled, her gray eyes looking haunted.
"What did you do?" He managed, the apparition now gone completely.
"Pulled the plug," Trista said, shrugging and kneeling next to her downed squadmates. "Neither Taryn nor I are Force-sensitive, not even remotely so, so seeing such an apparition should not have been possible for me. Then he mentioned combining your Force and technologies, and Lieutenant Skela said that it was like a hologram but wrong, and I put the pieces together. I am assuming that the brain in some sort of electronic stasis device in the next room over was his. I was not familiar with the computer systems so I just unplugged it."
"Put killing an ancient Sith on your resume now," Zekk laughed weakly.
Trista smiled faintly and then went to check on a stirring Ryadii.
"We assisted," Hiana added, still on her back with her eyes closed.
"Lieutenant?" Zekk asked gently.
Hiana smiled faintly at Zekk. "Still alive, sir. It was in the past, I survived, sir. I'm a kick-ass Hapan commando now."
"That you are," Zekk breathed with a weak laugh.
"You saw her memories." Trista stated, sounding subdued. She was half supporting Ryadii who had a massive burn in the chest-plate of her armor.

"You know about her past?"
"House Roh supported my mother's marriage to my father. You can imagine my grandmother was not pleased with that… It was said Ducha Roh committed suicide after being unable to stop the marriage of her daughter, but you know Hapan intrigue…House Gheer absorbed House Roh's assets days after."
"It is common knowledge among the nobility," Ryadii breathed, resting against the wall next to the others. The lightning had burned all the way to the skin, revealing how lethal it could have been if not for her hundred-thousand credit armor. "Ta'a Chume used Zel and Roh as examples that she was still in control even with Teneniel on the throne."
"Can I ask what happened to…your husband?" Zekk said in a soft voice to the sniper next to him.
Hiana answered in a whisper, her eyes fluttering close. "Eight years later, Prince Vadik, Lady Zel's father, led a raid on a pirate's den. My husband had loaned me out to obtain their services. The Crown Prince killed the pirates, saved me. I became a sniper. My husband had a birthday party, walked into my crosshairs."
Zekk took a slow and steady breath to collect himself. Hiana was his age and though he had spent a few months with the Shadow Academy, it paled in comparison to the eight years of hell she had gone through. It didn't help that the dark side miasma hadn't dissipated despite the apparition's defeat.
And that wasn't a good thing. He wondered how many others had been trapped and whether they had also put their brains in a jar. The apparition did say that whole families had been trapped within.
Yet, before he could do anything else, he heard a series of pneumatic pistons and metal clomping on metal. Glancing in the direction of the sound, he stared in bewilderment as the familiar figures of YVH-Bug-Stomper droids rounded the corner. A whole army of them. Made by Tenandro Industries and shipped by the crate-load to Ilum to help hold the line, the Bug Stompers were the latest in battle-droid tech.
"*There a reason all four of you are on the ground and look like hell?*" Taryn's voice came from the lead droid. She didn't sound happy.
"I killed a Sith," Trista said with a hint of boastfulness.
The silence that followed almost had Zekk laugh, but he knew better.
"Trista isn't lying, she did kill a Sith."
"We assisted," Hiana repeated.
"*Do you need support*?" Tenel Ka's voice came out of another droid.
"You mean, more than an army of droids?" Zekk laughed. "No. Now that we know what we're up against."

"*Sith are dangerous enemies*," Tenel Ka sounded reproachful.
"These ones are all brain, no brawns," Zekk replied, pushing himself to his feet and helping Hiana up. "The droids will be enough."
Several hours and a handful of computer-assisted Force Ghosts later, the ancient bunker had been cleansed of dark Jedi Anomid cybernetic brains. Trista got to add two more Sith to her resume, and Taryn, by proxy since it was revealed that the YVH droids were actually being remote controlled by Hapan commandos, got one. When the last stasis chamber went dark and the brain ceased to function, Zekk led Trista, Ryadii and Hiana back to the hole in the wall.
"It's still cold, but not evil cold," Trista commented, clipped to her belt was an ancient lightsaber that had once belonged to of one of the brains she had smited. 'It had seemed a waste to leave it on the weapon's rack' she had said.
"What is going to happen to this place?" Hiana asked Zekk.
"We'll probably just seal this place up again," Zekk said, helping Trista back out into the tunnel. "We may have destroyed the source of the dark side corruption, but the residuals are dangerous enough as it is."
"The Killiks will find it," Ryadii said evenly. "They can see in similar EM spectrums as myself."
Zekk processed that, realizing what the lieutenant was saying. If the Killiks did dig into the mountain and discover a dark-side polluted cavern, the results would be disastrous. They were already influenced enough by Welk's hold, but if they were to bathe in raw dark energies millennia old, they would become even more of a threat than before.
"You're right," Zekk groaned. "We're going to have to hold this location at all costs then. Leaving a planet full of the light side to the bugs is one thing, but if there is a nexus of dark energy…"
"How can we defend a place that will corrupt and demoralize our forces if we're near it?" Trista voiced.
"That's where the Jedi magic comes in," Zekk exhaled slowly. "The Queen Mother and Corellian Jedi and myself will have to use the Force to suppress the dark energies with the light. Or, in some of our cases, take that dark energy into ourselves. A Jedi is all about sacrifice after all."
"My sister is not going to like that," Trista groaned, her eyes closed. "And I am not too enthusiastic about such a plan either."
"Part of the job description as a Jedi," Zekk answered back. "We'll just secure this area with the Bug-Stomper droids for now. I'll go work out the finer details with the other Jedi."
-)[-III-](-

Zekk woke slowly, knowing that he was in his personal quarters on Ilum. He was also aware of a fact he supposed he should be growing used to. Gently using the Force to bathe the two women tucked against him in comforting waves of emotion and energy, he took the few seconds he had to watch Taryn and Trista sleep. Both always looked younger, more carefree as they slept. Each passively holding one of his arms to them and almost pouting if he tried to extract said arm. They gradually emerged from whatever pleasant dreams they were having, their bodies completely relaxed against his.
"Morning, Zekk," Taryn breathed, smiling contently.
"Morning. When did your sister join us?"
"I invited her," Taryn answered. "After the whole dark-side cave of evils, and with Moreem with the fleet, I figured she could use one of your cuddles. You're good at cuddling you know."
"Good to know," Zekk smiled, planting a kiss on her forehead.
Trista stirred, her gray eyes flicking upwards to focus on his face.
"Good morning, Jedi Knight Zekk."
"Morning Trista," Zekk smiled kindly. "Sleep well?"
"Very, thank you." Trista stayed where she was for several long seconds before finally sighing. "I suppose we should attend to our duties now."
"We have a few minutes longer," Taryn piped up. "If you want to stay that is. You know he's *our* Jedi."
Trista smiled faintly, her own eyes fluttering close as she made herself comfortable at his side. "He's yours, sister. I'm just grateful you're so willing to share him with me."
"You're my twin," Taryn answered simply, reaching over Zekk to squeeze Trista's hand.
Zekk took the whole 'possessive Hapan female attitude' in stride, finding it both amusing and endearing at the same time. After all, both Zel twins had been raised with the matriarchal-women-first atmosphere of their home world and held certain culturally engrained beliefs that probably would never disappear. At the same time, the possessiveness caused him to feel a certain warmth towards the both of them. Being an orphan, a wanderer, a Jedi flying to all corners of the galaxy, it was nice to know that he belonged *somewhere*, that *someone* thought he was worth their time.
The few minutes went by all too quickly for all three of their liking, but when a sizable portion of the planet's defenses relied on your leadership, they couldn't exactly call in a sick-day. Once they were fully dressed and ready to face the day's challenges, they emerged.

Of course, the first person to greet them was Sergeant Chiri Aros, whose eyes did a double-take as she saw both Taryn *and* Trista emerge from Zekk's pre-fab shelter.
"Stop right there," Zekk sighed, already sensing the woman's thoughts. "I think Ilum's defenders have sufficiently raised morale. No need to spread any more stories about my prowess."
"You take all the fun out of things, sir," Chiri mock-pouted. But she then winked at the Royal Zels. "My Ladies, good morning. I have to say, you're looking well-rested."
"Having a Jedi does that," Taryn said with a smirk.
"Well, my chances of getting one just went up," Chiri said. "The Dathomiri boys were called over after the whole cave-of-ghosts thing yesterday. They'll be arriving either tomorrow or the day after. Hiana's trying to hide it, but I think she really likes that strong and silent one. Ijun I think it was."
"How is she after yesterday?" Zekk said softly, mind flashing back to the memory he had seen.
At that, Chiri sobered. "Much more quiet than usual, and that's saying something. Like I said, I think Ijun's arrival will do wonders for *her* morale."
"Speaking of yesterday, was anything decided in the big Jedi meeting you had with the others?"Taryn looked to her boyfriend.
"Calling in reinforcements was one of them," Zekk answered. "The Dathomiri Jedi are more experienced at taming dark-side nexi. It's too late to move the heavy equipment around, and most of the gun-emplacements are already mounted, so we're going to have to improvise like crazy. With the cork unplugged so to speak, the Killiks should be able to sense the darkness of the cave when they get close enough, so it will essentially become an all-you-can-eat power buffet. In a way, our greatest liability has also become our greatest asset. Might have even won this battle for us."
"The bait within the bait," Trista said.
"Exactly." Zekk nodded. "Enough ordnance to level the mountain is being crammed into that bunker. We only need to keep the Killiks from escaping. Until then, the added Jedi support will help keep the dark side from spreading or affecting our forces. They'll also be on the lookout for any more dark side hotspots on this planet that might be buried in the ice."
"It's one thing to fight bad guys," Chiri sighed. "But to fight a nebulous energy that can drive you insane? I got to hand it to you Wonderknight, you Jedi really do have your work cut out for you."

The ground shook from a rumbling blast in the distance. The blast was promptly followed by a plummeting of temperature as the dark side washed over them all.
"Sithspit," Zekk groaned, recognizing the aura.
"What was that?"
"Taryn, when you subdued the construction workers and security force guys, how exactly did you do it?"
"Stun-cuff and tranq-darts, why?"
Zekk was already fast striding towards the source of the disturbance—the forward camp's med-center. "I should have seen this coming. Blasted dark side corruption."
"What?" Chiri asked, walking a step ahead of the Zel twins. Despite her cavalier attitude, the heavy-weapons expert *was* part of a squad designated to protect the Royal House of Zel. "What's going on?"
"How many people were afflicted with insanity?" Zekk pressed Taryn, temporarily ignoring Chiri.
"Almost fifty," Taryn answered just as quickly. "It's why it was such a big deal and I went to get you. One or two people, maybe they'd cracked from the stress, but almost the entire team had gone insane or was killed by those insane."
"Fill in the clueless?" Chiri grumbled.
"The spirits of almost fifty, millennia-old dark Jedi are currently enjoying their new bodies," Zekk said flatly to the din of another few explosions and blasterfire.
"What?" Trista blinked. "But we unplugged all the machines."
"The bodies of their victims are their power sources now," Zekk said. "It's probably why we only encountered that one ghost at the entrance to the bunker and the few others waking up. All the others had already found a new body. The only reason why the disconnect worked with the one attacking Hiana was because I had already kicked him out of her body."
"Wait, they're inside the bodies of the ones struck by insanity?" Taryn froze for a moment. "Then add another dozen to that number."
"Taryn?"
"I had a squad secure that opening to the bunker while I escorted the unconscious victims back to the entrance of the cave. When I came back they were still there, they just seemed a little…off. I thought it was because of the dark side, so I had them reassigned."
"And where did they go?"
Taryn thought for a moment, then paled. "I thought it best to send them as far away from the cave as possible. I sent them to the *Chume*'s escort detail."

"Tenel Ka can take care of herself," Zekk said. Another explosion. "For now let's focus on the ones we can get to."
Security forces were running in from all directions, speeders moving in to reinforce them. All around the forward camp they could hear blaster fire, screams, laughter, and alarms blaring. It was pure chaos not helped by the fact that each death and iota of panic fueled the dark side miasma saturating the camp.
"These guys are just engineers and security guards taken over by evil spirits, right?" Chiri asked. "Any chance you can boot out the spirits again?"
Zekk shook his head. "The essences of the original inhabitants of the bodies have already rejoined the Force."
"Damn it," Chiri held up her rifle as another wave of dark side energy washed over them. "I hate shooting our own."
Suddenly, the security force that had been taking point was sent flying, bodies and speeders thrown high into the air like the gravity of Ilum had suddenly been shut off. The mental attack was followed by a crazed laughter.
"This body will do, oh it will do!"
Zekk eyed the flailing victims and clenched his jaw. Throwing was a lot easier than stopping the downward momentum. Digging in deep, Zekk held out both his hands and released a slow, controlled breath. Immediately the dark side focused its unbridled tidal waves of energy onto him. An ordinary Jedi might have been overwhelmed, but Zekk had a personal connection with his darker nature.
"Thanks for the boost," he breathed out, using the added energy to help himself. The downward momentum of those in the air began to slow.
"A Jedi! A Jedi!" the same crazed voice roared. "Ruining all my fun!"
A figure leaped over the nearest collection of prefab shelters and landed with a small boom. The Force shockwave that was released in the process sent Taryn, Trista, and Chiri flying backwards. The three were bounced across the frozen ground with bone-jarring force, but managed to spring back to their feet and unload on the new assailant with a barrage of laser fire. Their target moved faster than their eyes could track, avoiding the lethal energy and sending concussive blasts of Force energy in turn. A blow hit Trista in the face and knocked her to the ground, still conscious but seeing stars. Taryn was clipped in the shoulder by another blast and was sent spinning backwards. Chiri tried to intervene but was hit with a succession of concussive blasts that sent her flying backwards and impacting painful against a large tractor.

The assailant stopped moving to stand in front of Taryn, and then promptly made a two-fingered gesture at her neck. Taryn, who had been trying to catch her breath, let out a strangled gasp. Her hands flew to her neck and her legs kicked out. Her attacker's face twisted into a cruel smile as he continued the attack, lifting Taryn into the air while keeping the grip around her neck. Then, to the attacker's confusion, Taryn managed to smirk at him. Rather than continuing to claw at her neck, both her hands fell to her sides and made throwing motions. Two daggers were flung from her sleeves and embedded themselves into the surprised attacker's forehead and throat. Only after falling to the ground, free of the Force attack, did Taryn gasp for the air her lungs had been denied.
Zekk didn't have time to worry about them as he focused on keeping the downward velocity of over a dozen people and two speeders from becoming terminal.
The owner of the crazed voice, a soldier in Galactic Alliance uniform, glared at Zekk with pure hatred. "Die!"
Unable to defend himself lest he lose the people he was trying to save, Zekk braced himself for a round of Sith lightning. Only, the round never came as a sniper bolt turned the chest of the deranged, possessed individual into vapor. The possessed soldier swayed for a moment, a look of disbelief in his eyes, before collapsing to the ground.
"Thanks Lieutenant Roh," Zekk muttered, setting the last of the bewildered security force back down to solid ground. He looked back to the commandos and saw that they were all unsteadily returning to their feet. "You okay?"
"What was that!" Chiri exclaimed, rubbing her sore ribs. "Those guys couldn't have been Jedi before!"
"The spirits that possessed them were Force sensitive," Zekk supplied. "Jedi magic."
"So we have almost fifty Sith running around!" Chiri blurted.
A torrent of purple lightning lit up one corner of the camp, an explosion echoed in another, and Zekk grimaced. "Looks like it."
"Then let's go add more Sith to our kill-count," Chiri growled.
"No worries, the ones nearby sensed the deaths." Zekk activated his lightsaber. "We're about to host a dozen of them."
"Oh," Chiri's confidence wavered. "You can take a dozen Sith no problem, right Wonderknight?"
"I appreciate the confidence you have in me," Zekk said dryly.
Like a squad of undead, the dozen possessed individuals emerged from the shadows around them. They were instantly recognizable by the way their eyes shone with visible energy as they fed off the miasma

around them. Taryn and Trista immediately went back to back, their own blasters trained on the nearest threat.
"To heck with this!" Chiri let loose with her assault rifle, liquid metal slugs flying out at the Sith.
Three held up their hands, and the projectiles halted where they were in mid-air and cooled harmlessly in the frigid Ilum air. Another held up a hand, and Chiri's weapon was yanked from her grasp.
"Hey, give my gun ba…" Chiri gripped at her throat, her eyes bulging.
"Enough!" Zekk hissed, slicing a hand through the air and breaking up the choke-hold.
Chiri went to her hands and knees, gasping for air. "Thanks Wonderknight."
"A Jedi on this world," one of the possessed sneered. "You will pay for your transgressions. As will your pets."
Another four held out their hands towards the Zel twins. "Know the true meaning of terror!"
The Zel twins opened fired with unblinking accuracy and on pure instinct the moment they felt the mental attack begin. The four attacking them immediately crumpled to the ground, bodies covered with blaster wounds.
Lightning began to crackle in the hands of the surviving possessed. And then another sniper bolt flew through the air, punching through one and entering a second. The remaining six looked in the direction of the attack, and two more fell to the ground as Zekk's lightsaber removed their heads from their bodies.
The last four realized their mistake, but were gunned down by the Hapan twins in lethal fashion.
"Damn it, even Hiana has more Sith kills than me," Chiri grumbled.
"What did the lessons tell you, Chiri? Brute strength never works against Force-able bad guys," Taryn said, helping her squadmate to her feet.
"*Sneaky sniping wins all the time*," Hiana's voice came over the comm. From the now uncharacteristic, almost delirious teasing in her voice, it was obvious she was still using the whole 'swimming in pain' defense.
Several large armored personnel carriers rumbled down the road in their direction, halting just before the camp perimeter. Even as the chaos continued, reinforcements emerged, climbing out of the vehicles. Jedi and commandos alike.
"Getting the battle for this planet started early?" Bazel Warv and his apprentice Twool asked.
"Keeping everyone on their toes," Zekk said with a weak smile. "Just possessed Sith this time. Nothing big."

Another electrical storm raked the camp's power generators and a thermobaric explosive cloud filled the air. The shockwave leveled rows of buildings and tossed about the heavily-armed speeders like Rancors playing with Gamoreans. The question of where the rest of Alpha squad was was answered a moment later as the others emerged from the chaos along.
"Good advice," a slightly bloodied Nyrani Lovett said to Zekk.
"Which advice?"
"If you can get away from a crazy Force-wielding opponent, take the opportunity to do so," Kona Zachi said, her body armor looking particularly crispy. "In this case, they're *really* crazy."
"Glad I could be of some help."
"Great, it looks like all of Alpha made it out," Chiri said brightly. "Didn't want to have to break in another new girl so soon."
"Tactical retreat, we're going back in there as soon as we have our own hand-wavy people supporting us," Hiana spoke, emerging from the shadows.
"Right," Yaqeel Sa'avetu muttered, hopping down from her transport as a wave of dark side energy buffeted the group. "Ancient and revered order reduced to 'hand-wavy people'."
"What's the plan?" Natua Wan asked.
"Couple dozen hostiles left. All Force-capable," Zekk debriefed them."Most are pretty deranged and are still getting used to have corporeal bodies again. We have to take them down fast."
"Just a usual day at the office," Seff Helin acknowledged.
"I don't remember the last time we had to fight deranged, possessed-by-ancient-Sith bodies," Bazel looked to his friend with a smile.
"You don't have to look so happy about it," Zekk said dryly.
"Hey, we've spent five months freezing our collective rears off on this planet. It's nice of the crazy-possessed Sith to give us a small warm up before the knock-down drag out fight."
"One thing is for certain," Natua said evenly.
"And that is?"
"The Dathomiri Jedi will be very disappointed that they missed this."
"That," Zekk laughed despite the situation. "Is a fact."
Lightsaber activated all around, blasters were readied, and with one last nod to the others, the forces of the Galactic Alliance charged into the battle to turn the tide.
-)[-IV-](-
The aftermath of the outbreak of ancient evil spirits possessing people was grim. The nearly fifty possessed had left a massacre in their wake. They had needed very little time in racking up a quadruple-digit kill-

count, having started in the less-guarded area of the med-tent and transportation. The initial guards had all been killed, and those sent to check on them slaughtered just as fast. In their rampage, the possessed people also destroyed equipment and machinery that couldn't be replaced in the short time the defenders had left. A time that was now a matter of days.

In the Northern Ilum Command Center, Zekk gazed about the various military commanders and Jedi seated around the table with him, as well as the holographic images of those in the fleet above his hemisphere.

"*It's confirmed*," Admiral Kadra Bres-Durron announced. Head of the skirmishing force, her small taskforce had only recently returned from weeks of harassing the Killik fleet. "*The Killiks are on their way and hopping mad. They're being nice and systematically destroying the sensor beacons we've laid out, so we know exactly where they are.*"

"*Have the preparations for Operation Bug-Boom been completed?*" Jacen Solo asked.

Zekk nodded. "The bunker is rigged to blow. We just need to hold long enough to make it convincing and then fall back to those locations."

"*The southern hemisphere site is also ready*," Jysella Horn announced. "*The one bunker up here also had Force-ghosties but the Dathomiri Jedi made short work of them.*"

"Great, at least now we know where to herd our massive Killik invasion force," General Farlander said evenly. "You Jedi just had to find the two bunkers of evil that our defensive lines hadn't yet managed to get to, didn't you?"

"Blame the Force," Zekk snorted. "And at least we found them before the bugs did and got drunk off the dark side."

"*Yeah, that would have been bad,*" Jacen said, torn between chuckling and being serious.

"Admirals, Jacen, I think it'll be best if you keep the fleet out of the battle as long as you possibly can. Let the Killiks land their legions. We need to milk that Mind Trick for all its worth and make sure the Killiks don't land those troops on other planets. "

"*Coupled with the overwhelming numbers, allowing the Killiks aerial and orbital superiority will create massive casualties among the ground forces.*" Kadra shook her head.

"But if the fleet is engaged and otherwise tied up with the superior numbers of the Killik fleet, they'll be one less asset we can't call on if the goings get rough," Battle-Meld coordinator Seff Helin pointed out. "I can focus on either the fleet or ground forces, not both. There are too many allies here but not enough Jedi with Battle-Meld experience.

Unless we somehow obtained a giant capital-ship-sized can of bugspray to kill them all in one fell-swoop, we need to take the option that will actually leave us with options in the long-run. We just have to hope our underground bunkers are underground enough to protect us."
"*Your forces are made up primarily of Corellians, Hapans, and Bothans*," Jacen said slowly. "*If the plan goes the way you're suggesting it should, the three governments will effectively lose their military superiority over their respective sectors. Even if we can pull off Operation Bug-Boom, the sheer number of Killiks...*"
"Will overwhelm us at pretty much every juncture," Zekk exhaled, glancing at the others in the room. "But it's either we tough it out down here or all those bugs start new colonies and ravage more systems. We're the ones who signed up for situations like this, laying down our lives to protect the galaxy. It's the best possible solution and you know it."
"*Understood*," Jacen said wanly. "*I'll make sure to keep the Mind Trick going then. Lomi Plo has actually been a great help in boosting the Killik's receptiveness to our suggestions*."
"How *is* that working out?" Zekk asked, glancing to Tenel Ka's hologram.
Tenel Ka inclined her head slightly. "*She had made it no secret that she covets my throne and crown, and that she is just biding her time. But we need non-Jedi strategies to counter Killik assumptions, and the ideas she has come up with definitely are unique."*
"That's definitely the Lomi I remember," Zekk shook his head. "There's a reason she survived when the Shadow Academy went down after all."
"*I forgot you were acquainted with her*," Tenel Ka remarked with a raised eyebrow.
"She was a couple years older. I was Brakiss' favorite, she was Tamith's," Zekk said wryly. "In another life, if Jaina hadn't saved me... who knows."
"*Thank you for the warning, I will now ensure my cousins are kept far away from her,"* Tenel Ka said drolly.
This caused those at the meeting to smile faintly.
"We'll make do down here somehow," Zekk finished grimly. "Just make sure the ships get here in time. Life and death will probably quite literally be a matter of seconds."
The holograms around the table all flickered off as the meeting finished, and Zekk let his eyes fall shut as he tried to organize his thoughts. Once again wondering how his life had lead him to the far

reaches of the galaxy he called home, he picked up his datapads and began to leave the room.
"We're insane, aren't we?" Seff Helin said, walking alongside the older Jedi. "I mean, more insane than usual."
"You sure you don't want to go to the warmer, Corellian side of the planet?" Zekk asked.
Seff's next smile was one tinged with sorrow. "Barv, Natua, and I are all trying to keep are distance from anything Corellian at the moment. Sella…well…she's not taking Valin's death well at all and we don't want to be walking reminders of what she lost."
"So switching places with the Yavin and Dathomiri Jedi…?"
"To give her some room," Seff shook his head sadly. "We thought that the whole 'scouting-skirmishing' role and a few months would help her clear her head, but if anything it's only made her more brittle. I don't think any of us know what to say."
"What about Natua?"
"She's Falleen," Seff answered back. "Emotions aren't her forte. Besides she was probably closer to Valin than any of us, with that whole World Brain mind-sharing thing."
Zekk nodded in understanding, mentally thanking the Force that, for the most part, he had survived two galactic wars and countless death-defying adventures with the core group of his friends intact. Jaina, Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowie had been there for most of his turbulent life, had more or less been his family growing up. Others were added in time, Anakin, Tahiri, Saba, Tekli, and they were all still alive as well. He couldn't fathom what the loss of any one of his friends would do to their odd family dynamic. If the same thing that happened to Seff's group, happened to his own, he could only imagine the pain ripple throughout the tightly knit bond they shared.
"I wish I knew what to say too," Zekk said softly.
"Hopefully all Sella needs is more time," Seff murmured. "And that she doesn't destroy herself before finding peace."
"She doesn't have much time though," Zekk reminded. "The Killiks will be here any day."
Seff grimaced. "Then the Yavin and Dathomiri people better keep her alive. No way I'm going to lose another friend to the bugs."
"Let's make sure we stay alive too, now that our plan is practically seconds away from being a suicidal one."
"Hey, we're Jedi. Unless we have some nonsensical crazy plan our day wouldn't be complete. Like Master Skywalker going to the Death Star by himself knowing his own people would be shooting it up. Or Master Katarn taking on entire bases of hardened soldiers and dark Jedi on his

own. Or Anakin taking that team to Myrkr. We're just adding another story in the glorious annals of the Jedi Order."
"If you didn't sound so sarcastic, I might have actually believed you," Zekk chuckled. "You're that optimistic about our chances?"
"Zekk," Seff looked to the older Jedi almost in disbelief. "Nearly every Jedi defending this planet is an apprentice or hastily promoted Knight. Most have never fought a battle where the fate of an entire planet, much less the galaxy, hung in the balance. Our enemy is a hive-mind augmented by the Force, with the memories of countless soldiers and the strategies of many species, with enough numbers to make our own impressive force seem like a tiny pebble on a beach. And our best bet to survive is to blow up said bugs and hope the fleet gets here in time to save what's left of us."
"Yup, sounds like one of our Jedi plans," Zekk agreed mildly.
Seff shook his head in resignation. "There is a definite disconnect between your generation of Jedi, Zekk, and mine."
"What would yours have done?"
"Probably gotten ourselves all killed like Valin, in a blaze of glory buying time for the ones smart enough to stay alive to come up with a solution in our place. Don't know if you realized it Zekk, but Valin was the leader of our group, and now that he's gone, we're all kind of foundering. None of us have what it takes to fill his shoes, and none of us want to. Yaqeel's shoulder deep in her people's troubles, Natua doesn't want to be a leader, Barv's always been a follower, and I'm just the guy they call in every time they need the Battle Meld set up. With the way Jysella is now, she won't be in any mental shape to command anyone she's close to. So we're trusting you guys, the Solos and their merry band of insane acolytes, to get us through this. If not, then, well, in a couple of weeks we'll probably *all* be dead."
-)[-Chapter End-](-

Unknown Regions
-)[-I-](-
Jaina rubbed at her temples as she reflected on her current situation. By now she would readily admit she was no longer a paragon Jedi, or even someone fit to call herself one. After all, she had agreed to a plan that would essentially blow up a planet with a little over two million people still on it. Granted, the planet was a polluted and destroyed wreck since the Vagaari had devastated it half a century earlier. Even then, a Jedi was supposed to be helping the helpless, stopping by the roadside to pick up that stray Kath Hound pup, righting wrongs. And

here she was, essentially condemning the Geroon to extinction all to save the rest of the galaxy.
When the Vagaari had warred with the Geroon, the Geroon had put up one heck of a fight and had only surrendered once the Vagaari had literally ripped much of the planet's surface apart with giant grav-engines. The population on Geroon went from billions to hundreds of thousands overnight. But it wasn't all. The Vagaari had then had been determined to show the Geroon who was boss by executing the scientists, the leaders, pretty much anyone who could bring the Geroon back out of the Stone Age. What was left was an enslaved and broken peoples used for hard labor and as living shields on Vagaari saucers. Some could argue that Jaina was doing the Geroon a favor by ending their misery.
But her conscience was still firmly Jedi-indoctrinated and wouldn't let her sleep easy with the decision. How could any Jedi ally themselves with the look-we-use-our-slaves-as-living-shields Vagaari? The Vagaari who had only recently proved that they weren't so removed from their previous generations when they blew the surrendered Killik fleet to bits. Vagaari who still believed that enslaving other species was a good thing, who was striving to build an empire so they could enslave even more species.
Because they had the ships needed, that's why, Jaina argued silently with herself. Helping the helpless is all well and good when the fate of the galaxy doesn't hang in the balance, but the Geroon sure as heck were in no position to provide any sort of support in the battle to come. The Geroon couldn't have forced the Chiss and Imperials to the diplomatic table, the Geroon barely even had anything resembling a table. When the war was over, and if they were all still alive, the Vagaari would be the buffer species, warding off anything else lurking about in the Unknown Regions. The Geroon would either be dead or enslaved. Not really a hard choice if one looked at it.
The Vagaari might have been a culture of immoral slavers, legitimizing their conquests with antiquated religious reasoning, but at the moment their goals and that of the Jedi Order was one and the same—stopping the Killiks. And since the rest of the galaxy chose to be blissfully ignorant of the threat on the horizon, even immoral slavers was better than no help at all.
She glanced out the viewport at the other fleets hanging amidst the rings of the shattered Geroon navy.
One ally was a group of immoral slavers. The other was a group of unethical pragmatists who believed that any means could be justified as long as the ends were satisfactory. Said group was descended from

a galactic government that believed in constructing planet-destroying weapons and genetically-modified plagues designed to wipe out targeted non-human species. She groaned. Said group whom her boyfriend was now technically a part of and had to march lock-step with established tradition or be replaced via firing-squad.
Immoral slavers, unethical pragmatists, and uncompromising xenophobes—the last of her trio of allies. As great an ally as Assistant Syndic Hess'irolia'nuroudo was, she didn't necessarily match the views of the hundreds of thousands of Chiss in the renamed Chiss Sector Local Defense Force. To nearly every Chiss in the fleet, the Chiss race was *still* at the top of the pecking order, and anyone that couldn't achieve space-flight on their own was not worthy of a second thought. Of course that immediately eliminated the Geroon for consideration.
This was where Jaina's problem got more complicated. After months of distrust and tensions, she had finally managed to get the Vagaari, Chiss, and Imperials to work together. Finally got them to agree on something, to put aside their distrust in one and other and make a united front.
And when immoral slavers, unethical pragmatists, and uncompromising xenophobes finally see eye to eye, the first thing they agreed upon was to blow up Geroon and the people on it if things went sideways.
Worst yet, Jaina couldn't do a damned thing about it. The effort to save what was left of the Geroon race would take up time and resources they didn't have. Not to mention the fact that the Geroon would have been deadweight even if saved. So she preserves their lives, all the Geroon have to look forward to was more slavery under the Vagaari with not even a home-planet to return to. But was that her choice to make?
She was the Sword of the Jedi for crying out loud. 'Sword' meant weapon of destruction, of death. Meant her battlefield was in places that blew up and shot various lethal things in her direction. Sure if she was bending the definition a sword could also be used for protection. And she was. What else would you call trying to hold off a giant bug fleet from annihilating galactic peace? Her place *wasn't* supposed to be in backrooms, spending time lecturing close-minded bigots for not following *her* Jedi code.
Jacen would have passed the months debating, compromising, rationalizing, and spending time that could have been used preparing for the Killiks trying to save two-point-three million people and a dead planet who couldn't contribute to the war effort anyways. Anakin would have saved the people and planet in record time, but would have

offended the Imperials, Vagaari, and Chiss while doing it and forever limit their participation in the next galactic emergency. And she was supposed to do something her two genius brothers wouldn't be able to do in her position?
She rubbed at her eyes, tired of glaring at the fleets, at the planet, and at the whole situation before her. She knew that she could scream and shout about it all she wanted, but the situation would still be there when she was done. Besides she was a girl of action anyways.
"I'm sorry, I must have misheard you," Assistant Syndic Irolia said, disbelief in her voice.
"[I am not as familiar with human humor,]" Supreme Commander Ariarsh added, frowning. "[Maybe what you said did not translate well.]"
"I have to admit, I am a little surprised by your proposal," Admiral Vitor Reige agreed. "And I don't quite understand it."
"What's there to misunderstand?" Jaina said, turning back around to face the leaders of their sector's defenses. "The Geroon are now under the protection of the Imperial Jedi and thus the plan to blow up the planet with them on it needs a little adjusting."
"We have only a few weeks left before the Killiks get here…" Irolia started.
"So we better work quickly," Jaina cut her off. She looked to the Vagaari leader. "I know the Vagaari Empire has many habitable planets in their starcharts."
"[We cannot waste time on useless slaves,]" Ariarsh protested.
Jaina glanced at the young Vagaari teen with barely veiled impatience. "The only time you're wasting at the moment, Supreme Commander, is mine."
"[Geroon is in the Vagaari Empire, not your human one.]"
Jaina eyed both Irolia and Vitor for a moment, then very slowly held up her hand. "Supreme Commander, you don't seem to understand this. I do not have time for this. You *will* help me relocate the Geroon."
"[I will help you relocate the Geroon]."
"Exactly," Jaina said. "The Vagaari have already been devastated enough and need every able body to rebuild. Saving the Geroon will help you avoid the search for and breaking of another workforce. You will be seen as a wise leader for making the right choice."
"[I will be seen as a wise leader.]"
Jaina's eyes flicked back to both Irolia and Vitor, both whom looked somewhat shocked. When their eyes met, Irolia and Vitor took an involuntary step back.

"Fine line between tyrant and benevolent dictator," Vitor remarked evenly.
"This tyrant is much too tired of having people die on her watch," Jaina said in return.
"The Chiss, Vagaari, and Empire all agreed that the Geroon were acceptable losses in comparison to the alternative," Irolia said tersely.
"You would override us?"
"If you were making the wrong choice, yes."
"And what gives you the right?" Irolia said. "To dictate terms to us? To tell us how we should manage the part of the galaxy *we* live in. You wanted an alliance of independent, free-thinking people. Not subjects and mindless followers."
"I wanted an alliance with people who think genocide is actually a *bad* thing," Jaina said coolly. "But I obviously didn't get it. Unfortunately for me, the genocide-happy people I did get are the only ones standing between a massive bug fleet and countless noncombatants who have no clue what's coming for them."
"So you'll use your Jedi sorcery on us if we don't agree?" Vitor asked.
Jaina held his even gaze unflinchingly. "If it helps the Vagaari, the Empire, and the Chiss break a millennia old habit of dismissing others as less worthy than they, yes. I'm through with playing games, choosing my words to fit my audience. Tired of treating you all with kid gloves when there are things so much bigger than all of us at stake."
"You can't have independent allies and then override them when they make decisions you don't agree with," Irolia said. "The entire galaxy is not bound to your Jedi rules. Doesn't need to live and breathe your sensibilities."
"You're right," Jaina said. "Irolia, I gave Ariarsh a reason, you want mine for forcing the Chiss to go along with this?"
"I assume you have a good reason."
"More than good," Jaina almost laughed, the lack of sleep and stress of her situation making her throw caution out the airlock. "The Chiss have to be one of the most arrogant, stuck-up, and self-centered races I've ever come across. You promoted Jagged's father because your family wanted a disposable lapdog, someone they could blame if something went wrong. You sat on the sidelines as the rest of the galaxy burned in the Yuuzhan Vong War, simply because you believed that it was not your problem. Your people could have helped the Vagaari grow, could have guided them like a big brother or sister, but instead you shot them apart because they were 'inferior' to Chiss sensibilities. Every single time something was happening in the galaxy, the Chiss chose to

act as if they were the only ones that mattered, as if their corner of space was all that was worth knowing."
"I still don't see how…"
Jaina activated her holotable and put up images of the planet below. Bubbling streams of magma, jagged mountains that ran for hundreds of kilometers, particle-filled yellow air, the sun looking red in the obscured sky.
"Look at that! Just look at it! Sure the Vagaari may have been the ones to tear up the planet, but the Chiss share some blame too. For all your technological superiority, you could have easily chased the Vagaari off this planet, cared for the Geroon and earned their eternal gratitude. Instead, all your people saw was two animals going at it and ignored all of the suffering and anguish in your own backyard! Do I need to show images of the Outer Rim systems in similar states of decay that are right on your boarders? Denied help because they weren't Chiss? The Chiss Ascendancy is gone, in its place is Moff Fel and the so-called Third Imperium. Your culture of looking the other way, ignoring anything that isn't Chiss, well, now's a good time as any to end it don't you think?"
"Jedi Solo," Vitor cleared his throat. "I thought we agreed that this was the best tactical decision given the time and personnel constraints."
"Admiral, you really don't want to get me started on the Empire."
"I don't agree with many of their policies in any case."
"But you still come up with plans that would make Palpatine proud," Jaina shot back immediately. "Sure you might be okay with being allies with non-humans, but you still couldn't care less about non-humans who can't immediately benefit the Empire. If you had, you wouldn't have even taken a second to shoot the plan down. All three of your peoples! Let me make this clear, sacrificing a race of peoples…"
"[There are only two million compared to the trillions of lives at stake,]" Ariarsh said, shaking his head as if trying to clear it.
"So you're saying I should space the three of you?"
"Excuse me?" Irolia blinked.
"What, you're just three lives. If I get rid of you I'm saving two million, aren't I?"
"Perhaps we should hear just how you plan to move the Geroon without sacrificing the readiness of our fleet or strain our already thin supply-lines," Vitor, the oldest one in the room, said evenly. "A Star Destroyer can hold five to fifty thousand crew depending on the model and…."
Jaina had her hand up. "And we're not using them."
"We aren't?"

"We're using Vagaari ships."
"[We are?]"
"The Geroon are members of the Vagaari Empire," Jaina said. "As the leader of the Vagaari Empire it's your job to see to their well-being. Get all the slave carriers you can, they're only being used for supply runs at the moment anyways. Divide them up on Vagaari worlds that need the most help recovering from the Killik attack. Believe me, the people of those worlds will see you as a hero, and I'm sure you can make so points with other Vagaari clans by allocating them the added help."
"[I…okay.]" Ariarsh rubbed at his forehead. "[After this meeting, I will go confer with Elansh, Vagaari societal issues are her domain after all.]"
"By all means," Jaina said evenly.
"You don't need our help then," Irolia said.
"Haven't finished my plan." Jaina said testily. "You're going to pack up all those efficient Chiss engineers and scientists and send them along with the Geroons. The Chiss are going to do what they should have done a long time ago and help both those races back to their feet. The three races are then going to be this galaxy's buffer against anything else out there. Three united, strong races, instead of one isolated one."
"The Chiss…"
"Listen to orders," Jaina finished again. "You give the command, it will be carried out. In the end, it will make the Chiss stronger as a whole."
"I assume you have something in mind for the forces of the Empire?"
"Everything starts at the top," Jaina nodded. "You and all the commanding officers of the Empire's forces here are going to spend the next few days getting to know the Geroons personally. Will be helping them pack up what little belongings the Vagaari allow them to have, will put names to faces and histories to an empty past. The greatest downfall of the Empire is its ignorance and failure to learn from non-human races, Thrawn was a perfect example of the Empire doing things right. Now, as a Jedi, I can't tolerate ignorance and to correct that, I'm replacing it with knowledge. So order, threaten, do whatever you have to to get your commanders and whoever else you think will need it down to Geroon. Like the Chiss, the Empire can only come out for the better."
"You do realize you're asking the impossible. Change won't come overnight," Vitor said.
"Change won't come at all if no one even tries to change," Jaina answered softly. "If everyone sits back and waits for someone else to step up, for someone else to take that leap of faith, then nothing is

going to happen. Change might not happen for years, but we will look back at this meeting and say that change started here."

-)[-II-](-

For someone who had the job of directing billions of homicidal bugs in the direction of his best friends, his lover, and his siblings, Jacen felt pretty calm. Where Jaina and Anakin had multiple fleets to command and battle strategies to worry about, all he had to do was maintain the largest mind-trick in history. Commanding fleets and organizing battles had never been his strong point anyways. His task allowed him to call upon the bag of tricks he had learned during his four-year pilgrimage to the various esoteric Force-cults.

Much of his day was spent immersed in the Force, connecting the myriad of Jedi presences into one to rival the power of the great hive-mind of the Killik collective. Light and dark, it didn't matter to him. The Force was one whole, and there was no greater example of that than the hive-mind of the Killiks, the Kind. For the average Jedi, the Killiks were either light or dark. Most judged the Killiks on their actions, not their intent. Not seeing that the Killiks were not inherently evil, and only seeing that they were not inherently good. But not him. Not the only Jedi in the 'meld' who believed in the Unifying Force. Jacen knew that the mind trick's success relied mainly on his understanding to maintain that empathetic link. It also relied on his understanding of the myriad of Jedi that linked up to him to aid in the mind-trick.

All around the galaxy, Jedi were taking part in the meld, with Masters and mentally-adept Knights acting as nodes to pass on the thoughts and strength like focal points in a spidersloth web. A web the Kind was thoroughly ensnared in. Being the final point of the web, Jacen received it all and sent it onwards to Welk and the approaching fleet. This made Jacen very familiar with the added thoughts of the various participants of the meld. It would have been child's play for him to 'alter' the perceptions of those in the meld, to harvest their inner most secrets for future knowledge.

And he would not deny he had been tempted on more than one occasion. Despite everyone else seeing him as this infallible Conscience of the Jedi, he had feelings, he had wants and wishes. With the power the meld was giving him, it was hard not to resist the urge to help those he loved. And why shouldn't he? How come he had all this power at his disposal but couldn't use a single iota of it to help keep his wife and daughter safe?

But then he'd remember Vergere's lessons, remember her many comments and riddles she would give on the four-year sojourn. A Jedi couldn't let his or her own emotions dictate a course of action. Only

logic, the pursuit of the most efficient and optimal solution to a problem would make the galaxy a better place. He couldn't stop to give every beggar he saw a credit, couldn't feed all those starving on a planet, and even if he did, the galaxy wouldn't be a better place in the long-run. If he enabled people, gave them a reward they didn't deserve, upset the natural balance of weak and strong, then unforeseen repercussions would occur. Instead of feeding the hungry, he should instead discover why the food-stores weren't reaching them. Instead of giving credits to the needy, he needed to ensure that their elevation was one that others could justify so order could be maintained.

Spending most the day in meditation, immersed in the Force, and more importantly, away from most his friends and Tenel Ka, had given Jacen a lot of time to reflect on his present and future. Even if the war with the Killiks—now being called the Swarm War by media outlets—ended in the next day, week, or year, the galaxy was still going to be in pretty poor shape.

Well, most of it. He didn't need the Force to see the political web the war had created. It wasn't just the Hapans who had a stake in this, he had to remind himself. There was a whole lot more to this than just his feelings for one Queen Mother and sixty-three systems.

The Imperial Remnant, self-proclaimed Third Imperium, was growing fast, stretching into Mid-Rim sectors and spanning far along the Outer Rim, accumulating nearly three dozen prominent systems in addition to the few dozen it already controlled. Perhaps it was growing too fast though, as it barely had the resources to keep up with its growing territories. The force it had sent to help safe-guard Jagged's territory was but a drop in the bucket compared with the resources it had available to it. Even then, should Jagged's sector fleet, Admiral Reige's force, and the Chiss take heavy losses, they would definitely destabilize the region's security. And an insecure Empire was one that always fell back on heavy policing tactics to maintain stability.

The Bothans, on the verge of a civil war thanks to the defection of the Bothan Jedi and Asyr Sei'lar's faction, were also a stabilizing presence in their region of space. But the reckless, he would say Anakin-like way the Bothan Jedi had obtained the Bothan fleet, definitely jeopardized that. If the Bothans took heavy losses in their battle with the Killiks, the traditionalists back on Bothawui would gain strength. If that happened, the Yuuzhan Vong would definitely retaliate and war, genocide, and all sorts of non-productive consequences would follow. If the Bothan forces didn't take heavy losses, they would still have to face the traditionalists when they returned, and they'd no doubt be backed by

angry Yuuzhan Vong. No matter how the Swarm War unfolded, the Bothans and their immediate allies and trading partners would be in for some rough times.
Corellia was already reeling from the results of its participation in the fight against the Killiks. Losing a fleet admiral and a famous Jedi like Valin Horn, in addition to nearly every ship that had been sent to the Consortium, had dealt an almost mortal blow to Corellia's expansionistic aspirations. What had been once called the Corellian Confederacy by its HoloNet news channels was becoming more of a cluster of loosely allied systems who would on occasion lend the others various supplies. The downfall of Aidel Saxan further stirred things up and left Corellia's future very much in doubt. Should Wedge Antilles fail to pull off one of his famed underdog victories and the Corellians lose yet another fleet group, their military strength would suffer greatly as well.
And then there was the Galactic Alliance, the government Jacen was a senator for, even though he was beginning to feel less and less like one as the days went on. The politicians on Denon had set the situation up as a win-win gamble for themselves no matter the outcome. Even if Anakin and the others failed to halt the Killik advance, they would have done their best to drastically weaken said advance and buy those on Denon more time to figure out a 'Plan B'. If Anakin did succeed, he would have done so sacrificing the military capabilities of many of the Galactic Alliance's rivals for galactic dominance. There was no doubt that their little fleet would get their rears handed to them. After all, the Killiks had nearly a hundred capital ships, fighters, and assault craft for every one ship in the GA fleet. If Anakin won, it wouldn't truly be a victory at all. Sure the war might be over, but then they will have just wiped out nearly all the Killik population and in exchange have lost hundreds of thousands of lives in fighting men and women. But the Denon politicians didn't care. In fact, the battle was coming at such a politically fortuitous time, the elections for the next Chief of State. Everything the soldiers were fighting and dying for out in the Unknown Regions were simply being used as fodder for political debates.
"We done thinking out loud to the bugs now?" Nelani Dinn chirped, brushing imaginary dirt off her robes and rising to her feet.
"Just about," Jacen smiled faintly, his mind still focused on the much bigger picture of a 'post-war galaxy'.
"I do have a question, Master."
"Shoot," Jacen said.
"How exactly does your brother plan to fight off the billions of bugs we just threw at them? I mean, the fleets and ground forces can give as

good as they can get, but this victory won't mean much if we lose nearly all of them in the process."
"If he has some sort of plan, he hasn't shared it with me," Jacen shook his head.
"But…"
Jacen held up a hand. "I asked him not to. Remember, for the past three to four months, we've been in constant contact with the Kind. As much as I trust my own abilities, there is still the off-chance that the Killiks have something in their bag of tricks and can skim off info without my knowledge."
"Oh," Nelani frowned again. "Then what exactly will *we* be doing while the others are all whoosh, whoosh, pew, pew, boom!"
"You mean fighting the Killiks?"
"Well, yeah, I wasn't making those noises for the fun of it," Nelani rolled her eyes. "Are we going to be sitting here, in the middle of space between three uninhabitated systems and meditate on things?"
"Yup. We're going to be the fleet yammosk so to speak," Jacen chuckled. "While Anakin is zooming around in the *Falcon* and being all front-line hero, we'll be in the back guiding the different fleets and helping the Battle Meld maintain stability even when Jedi start dying. Not the most glamorous, but we might actually be the difference between life and death for our friends."
"So, no pressure at all?"
"None."
"And you're okay with the whole 'no glamour' aspect of our job?"
He heard something in her voice, almost like doubt, that made him look at her in surprise. "Why wouldn't I be?"
"Master, for the past three-ish years, you've been in the headlines for nearly every major Jedi-related HoloNet news article, on the cover of every magazine that wanted to suck up to the Jedi Order. 'Senator Solo approves relief measure for stricken system.' 'Jedi Knight Jacen Solo shows Order's commitment to Obroa-Skai by personally breaking ground for the new university.' 'Esteemed High Council Member Jacen Solo disapproves of the handling of the Tion Affair.'"
"Okay, I get the idea. Your point?"
"Well, since your brother's been back it's all: 'Anakin Solo saving the galaxy.' 'Anakin Solo getting things done.' 'Anakin Solo cutting through bureaucratic tape and stabilizing systems just by showing up.' Read between the lines and you have the media wondering why all these problems got so bad when your brother could just swoop in and fix it just like that. We're the ones using the meld to bring the bugs here not him."

"His idea."
"We're the ones making sure that *his* idea is actually more than an idea but putting it in play. And we'll be the ones keeping his ad hoc fleet together when the shooting starts. But we have no holo-cams following us around. No daily HoloNet broadcasts shadowing our movement or predicting our greatness."
"At one time, Nelani, I might have been bothered by that, but you know what?"
"What?"
"I'm not," Jacen said truthfully. "The truth is, I couldn't get it done, but my brother could. I couldn't see the problem staring me in the face and nearly had the galaxy implode on my watch. Anakin and I both call this galaxy home, so do you and hopefully everyone else who lives in it. Sure Anakin might get all the accolades, but we all know it's going to take more than one person, no matter how amazing, the save the galaxy."
"Master Skywalker did it by blowing up a Death Star and then killing the Emperor, twice."
"And Uncle Luke had my dad covering him on the first trench run and had an army of Ewoks helping a team of rebels take out the shield generator and cause enough chaos so that he could escape. He was the hero of the show, but the supporting cast made that bit of heroics possible."
"So what, we're supporting cast now?" Nelani made a face.
"No, we're just doing our jobs as Jedi. Why do we need the accolades for it?" Jacen responded. They left the meditation chambers of the small ship they were on and headed towards the mess. "If I wanted the parades, the praise, the medals, I would have tried to run for Chief of State. I would have gotten myself a military commission and looked impressive pointing at targets from the bridge of a Star Destroyer. But I don't want all that. For a while I forgot that being a Jedi meant truly serving the people in any way I can. And I truly am better used acting as the conduit for the Jedi Order's forces out here. I mean, who else has the opportunity to get in touch with nearly half of the Order's apprentices and learn how the next generation of the Jedi Order thinks? Learn what is needed to improve the bond between these apprentices and the Knights and Masters and make the Jedi Order better in the process."
"Oh, I didn't see it like that," Nelani admitted.
"Sometimes having time to think, slowing down the moment around you, the Force gives you the answers you need," Jacen said, nodding.

"My uncle once told me to keep asking my questions, to never stop, and I haven't. For a while though, I was just asking the wrong ones."
"It does feel kind of awesome, having all that power being shunted towards us so we can send it off to the Killiks," Nelani commented, absently flicking her wrist towards a stack of datapads and levitating them into a pyramid with ease. She made another gesture and several food packs danced their way out of the cabinet. "These past few months there's been so much residuals after every meld that I'm definitely going to miss it when we stop broadcasting."
"Anything else?" He sensed her contemplative mind take another turn.
"Yeah, with the boost, every time they transmit, I can definitely feel Seha even though we're like a gazillion light years from Denon. Is that how it was like with you and the Queen Mother. I mean, Hapes isn't exactly close to Denon or some of the other planets we went and you said you could always feel her."
"Something like that," Jacen patted her shoulder. "Friendships, especially on the level I have with the Queen Mother, are something the Force likes to reinforce."
"It almost seems like a waste, you know."
"Hmmm?"
"The power," Nelani said in a subdued voice, her fork half-raised. She shook her head and smiled sheepishly, lowering her utensil. "I mean, I know I shouldn't be having these thoughts but we have so much power at our fingertips and all we're doing is sending false thoughts to a hive-mind. If the Jedi Order is so powerful, how come there's so much suffering and darkness in the galaxy? It's like the only time the Order is at its best is if something is threatening its existence. We couldn't care less about the billions of refugees out there, about the corruption and crime on the countless systems. If it doesn't hurt the big picture it's like we turn a blind eye."
"We can't help or save everyone, Nelani. If we tried, we'd stretch ourselves too thin and ultimately even more people will suffer because of it."
Nelani shook her head. "I don't buy that, Master. Sorry, I don't. It just sounds like a lame excuse to explain why the Jedi are only focusing on those with enough credits to wave around. You were on Lorrd, you saw what it was like there. Just in the capital city alone, there were hundreds of orphans just like me scrounging around in the sewers and alleys while Galactic Alliance poured money into preserving the universities and other moneyed places. I mean, it's not that I'm ungrateful that you pull me out of that, but I just think of all the others

who didn't have a knight with shiny glow-sword swoop in and save them."
"Nelani," Jacen said. "With all the Force-sensitives that have gone missing the past seven years, and with the casualties the Order has taken since the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War, the Jedi Order is barely able to field three-hundred beings. How can you expect us to make a difference tending to the almost insignificant problems on distant planets when there are wars to be stopped, treaties to be made, and decisions that on a grand scale affect not just a few hundred lives, but trillions? We Jedi are in a rare position to have the ear of the government, to be able to make life better not just for those few hundred orphans on one planet, but on many times many that number in many systems."
"I bet to those cold and wet orphans on Lorrd their problems aren't insignificant," Nelani challenged, her eyes flashing. "Jedi are supposed to protect those who can't protect themselves."
"And we are, giving them a voice in the Senate when they don't otherwise have one. The power you've mentioned, the one we're using against the Killiks, that power is currently saving trillions from becoming Joiners. Sure they might not have the most ideal life, but at least they won't become Joiners."
"And what after?" Nelani said. "If the Jedi Order is so strong can't we…I don't know…use the mind-trick on those numbskulled politicians on Denon to make real change…Oh Force, I can't believe I just said that. That's sooo dark side."
"Is it?" Jacen asked, his gaze on the viewport.
"Master?"
Jacen released a small breath. "You have a point. If we can use the Force on an entire race of sentient beings in order to protect the greater galaxy, literally force them to think a certain way so we can kill them en masse, why is that not dark?"
"Well…" Nelani blinked slowly. "We're trying to save…oh."
"Exactly," Jacen said softly. "If we justify what we're doing to the Killiks because we're trying to save all those other people, how is doing the same to the politicians any different? If the politicians are using their powers to cause suffering and letting their greed get the better of them, won't the Jedi be in the right if they step in?"
"Oh," Nelani repeated again, her eyes wide. She looked away, trying to organize her thoughts. "But…it's bad. Forcing people to think the way you want even if it's for the better."

"So because the Killiks don't look like you or me, or like any of the other sentient races in our alliance, it's okay to force our way of thinking onto them?"
"They're trying to do it to us," Nelani complained, then stopped once more. "Quit making my head hurt, Master."
Jacen just smiled faintly. "You see, this is again why the Force is not light or dark, but one whole. Like in the Yuuzhan Vong War, the scientists justified the baffor chemical grenades and Omega Red and Blue by saying it would save lives, by saying the Yuuzhan Vong have done the same or worst to us."
Nelani rubbed at her forehead and groaned. "Okay, okay. Fine. It's just wrong then, what we're doing to the Killiks. But at the same time, if we don't do this wrong thing, then it's even more wrong to let the Killiks kill us all and waltz into the galaxy? You know, Master, this goes against everything Master Skywalker and Solusar say in their teachings. For them, bad acts are never allowed, no matter the reason."
"Bad from whose point of view?" Jacen said. "Will our using this mind-trick be bad for those who get Joined if we hadn't? Will it be considered bad by those who have the luxury of viewing this war from the safety of Denon thousands of lightyears away?"
"No and yes?" Nelani groaned again. "I get it. I know you're saying we can't save everyone, but I refuse to believe it. If we start ignoring the orphans and refugees, the people we're supposed to be speaking for, then how in blazes do we know what they want? Are we just assuming that the Jedi Order knows what's best for them?"
Now it was Jacen's turn to sigh. "My own master once told me that the reason the Jedi used to stay out of politics is because the realm of politics will reveal that they truly are failures at keeping galactic peace. That the realm of politics will show the Jedi all those orphans, the poor, and the helpless that the Jedi are failing to protect. If the Jedi stayed in their bubble, only responded to direct requests for help, they could feel good about their near hundred-percent success rate. But Uncle Luke and my brother just had to make the Jedi Order a part of the Galactic Alliance, and if Master Hamner wins the election for Chief of State, that merging will become even more pronounced. Unless the Jedi return to their political isolation, our failures will only continue to mount."
"Says the Senator of the Jedi Order," Nelani said shrewdly.
"Leaving a power vacuum will also do more harm than good," Jacen replied. "I want to step down, but I can't. Not if it means stepping down will hurt those I was trying to help in the first place.
"Huh?"

"These past few months have got me thinking on Vergere's words. I can do so much more for the galaxy if I wasn't constrained by the Senate and all its rules and regulations. Being a senator is deceivingly constraining. You have just enough power to propose a change, but not enough to make it happen. At the same time, being in the Senate also gives a voice to those the Jedi try to help, ensures that the Jedi Order's agenda is heard by the hundreds of thousands of sectors and that the laws that are passed are just. I've more experience working with the various senators, knowing the ins and outs of the Senate, than any other Jedi. And when this war is over, we can't afford to let anyone new take another five or ten years learning the ropes. Change has to happen swiftly, and it won't if the voice of the Jedi Order in the Senate is stumbling around learning which senators to court and who can make that change happen."

"But what about policy and all that stuff you were telling me earlier?" Jacen said. "True power isn't measured in the amount of Force one can wield, but how one wields it. Take Danni Quee for example. She's extremely intelligent but has barely a shred of Force control in her. Yet her inventions helped turned the tide of the Yuuzhan Vong War. Or take my mom, who has no formal Force training yet has done so much for this galaxy. I might not be able to save individual orphans, Nelani, but I don't forget about them either. It's just, sometimes things done that may seem bad, like ignoring the orphans in favor of larger problems, can often times result in even greater boons in the long term. Same with the 'policy and all that stuff,' it's a pain to deal with now, and short term I could do more as a Jedi Master than senator. But if I want long-term change, if I want the fixes I've made to stick, I need to have the government backing it up."

Nelani nodded slowly. "I almost believe that, Master. But where do you draw the line? Sure we're mind-controlling an entire race of bugs, but why do we stop there? What keeps us from inventing another reason?"

"Our hearts, our trust in the Force," Jacen answered. "And our consciences. When we do things like exert our will onto a sentient species, we just have to believe we're making the galaxy a better place in the long run. Otherwise, well, when we look in the mirror we'll see we've become the very things we were trying to beat."

-)[-III-](-

"You sure you want to do that?" Admiral Nek Bwua'tu said to Anakin Solo, looking over the plan Anakin had just placed before him. "You're sacrificing nearly all of the starfighter force guarding the Utegetu Nebula. A force Moff Fel is personally commanding."

"It's either that or short-change Ilum," Anakin answered, his face drawn and looking much older than his twenty-seven years of age. "You've seen the latest reports, admiral. The Killiks are going to hit Ilum, Geroon, and the nebula at exactly the same time thanks to their hive-mind. There won't be any time to shift forces once the fighting starts because everyone is going to be besieged by an enemy fleet many times their own. We can't even use the Yuuzhan Vong as a reserve fleet now that my sister has decided that blowing up an inhabited planet is actually a bad thing. If the Killiks break through either Ilum or Geroon, then the forces at the Utegetu Nebula will be slaughtered anyways."
"That is still the lives of thousands of pilots, of several thousand of the few ships you've left them with."
"What's that old Bothan proverb? Lose a battle to win a war? The Killiks have to believe on some level that they're breaking through, that it's safe enough for their leaders to enter the galaxy. Otherwise they can out-grind us to pieces."
"You're deliberately sacrificing that fighter force to make the Killiks believe victory is eminent, so the leaders appear?"
"Exactly," Anakin said, meeting the Bothan's purple-eyed gaze. "And I don't like the plan any more than you do. The Welk I remember was an opportunistic coward who didn't act until the odds were in his favor. That's not going to change just because he got himself Joined. And just like we saw in Hapes and elsewhere, once the Killik Queen or Joiner Herald is taken out, the rest of the hive becomes docile. To be honest, admiral, I don't expect any of our three fleets to win their engagements. What I do expect though, is that they can hold off the Killiks long enough for Welk to arrive so I can board his ship and finish it once and for all."
"*That's* why you've kept this small fleet from joining the others," Nek said in understanding.
"When the boss appears, it's our job to rush in and take him out," Anakin nodded. He then looked away. "I'm counting on us being fast enough to the punch to save our friends and family out there. But I'm prepared for the worst."
"Director Solo, I just want to say that I'm glad you're the one in charge," Nek replied evenly. "I for one, though I am no coward, will never have been brave enough to make the calls you have made."
"Is it bravery or stupidity, admiral?' Anakin answered back. "I'm knowingly sending tens of thousands to their deaths for a mere shot at the leader of the Killik forces. Then, once he emerges, the odds of reaching his no doubt well-protected ship surrounded by the best the

Killiks have to offer in this small fleet we have, are very slim. To top that off, we have to board, find, and kill him before everyone else we care about dies. And I'm gambling all of this on the simple belief that I not only have to get this done, but *need* to get it done."
"When you put it that way," Nek stroked his chin.
"Anyways, that's why I'm giving you those orders, Admiral. In case something goes wrong. The government back on Denon needs to know how we can stop the Killiks."
"Understood," Nek said. He scratched the back of his head almost reluctantly. "But are you sure this is the best course of action. Surely she will protest."
"We agreed to not make orphans out of our children. She says she's tried it and doesn't recommend it," Anakin said with a grim smile. "And someone has to rally the Jedi Order and Yuuzhan Vong if we fail out here. I'm trusting you, admiral. Make sure whoever you select can get her back to Denon in one piece."
"Your mate will not fight at your side?"
"We have children now, admiral," Anakin murmured. "As much as I would love to have her by my side, neither of us will be so selfish as to take both of Cassa and Jayce's parents away. She hates it, I hate it, but at the same time, this is as best of a Plan B as I can come up with. If we fail out here, the galaxy needs to know the hows and whys."
"Yes, sir," Nek said.
Anakin patted the man on the shoulder as he made his way towards the room's exit. "Thank you, Admiral. Hopefully I'm just being overly cautious and those contingency plans in your hands won't be needed."
Anakin left the *Sunrider*'s briefing room and strode down the ship's hallways, trying to keep various morbid thoughts from popping up and making his negatude prominent. Not that Tahiri would care at the moment. Fighter that she was, she hadn't agreed to his plan at all. His argument with his wife when he had told her about his plan had pretty much been the closest thing they had had to a drawn out fight in their otherwise blissful seven years of marriage.
"*Don't give me that Solo!" Tahiri snarled, jabbing a finger into his chest. "I didn't leave you on Myrkr when we were just boyfriend-girlfriend and I was fifteen, why in the twin suns of Tatooine would I do that now! 'Stronger together' remember what Master Ikrit told us all those years ago?"*
"*We also agreed that when we returned to this galaxy we weren't going to leave our kids without parents!"*
"*Oh, so it's okay to leave them without their dad? You know how much Cassa loves you, how much* ***I*** *love you. Do you truly think we would*

give a bantha's backside about this galaxy if you go and die for it and all they do for you in return is build a stupid monument? We're partners Anakin!"
"*Listen..."*
Tahiri poked him in the chest again. Her voice loud in the enclosed nature of their quarters, her green eyes dangerously close to her Yuuzhan Vong chlorine ice. "No you listen you big dumb gundark! I get what you're saying. Someone has to tell the dunderheads on Denon about what unfolds out here, so choose someone else! My place is out here, fighting at your side."
"Tahiri!" Anakin snapped back at her, knocking her hand away and gripping both her shoulders. "Stop! Just be quiet for once and listen! Cassa and Jayce, yes they would probably be better off with a mother ***and*** *father. But if I wanted one of us raising them, I'd rather it be you. You're a survivor, always have been. You're determined, strong, resourceful, and brave, traits that have all been passed down to Cassa and hopefully Jayce. If anyone has a chance of keeping them alive if this galaxy falls into chaos, it's you! My face is plastered on every holo-screen, my voice recorded countless times, but you, you can blend in, disappear with them and keep them alive."*
Anakin paused to fight back his own tears, his arms shaking as he held Tahiri at arms-length. "Please, understand that I'd much rather you stay and fight. But we can't be that selfish anymore. And it's not just our children, but this whole galaxy who will suffer if we both stay and die. You told me yourself, Saluup Fing has a hundred Yuuzhan Vong ships sitting in the core of the galaxy waiting for word to attack Bothawui. They won't listen to any other Jedi but you. The Yuuzhan Vong attack Bothawui and all hopes of keeping the galaxy stable are off. If Tenel Ka and Jace falls out here because the plan I came up with just wasn't good enough, their daughter becomes fair-game. Someone who is strong and smart like you needs to be around to ensure the next generation of Solos grow up and continue the fight, hopefully succeed where we've failed. Damn it, Tahiri! You know me better than this. I'm not trying to send you away to keep you safe, that's the last thing I would do! "
Anakin finished, breathing heavily and shaking his head. Tahiri continued to glare up at him, her green eyes piercing into his pleading blue ones. "Why do you think I'm so angry?"
"What?"
"The fact that you have this perfectly logical and sensible reason lined up and think that the reason justifies everything. That it's the best possible thing you can come up with," Tahiri replied, shrugging his

hands off her and turning her back to him. "Did you even hear a word of what you just said? When did the fate of the galaxy become more important than our family? Than us? We've only been away from Zonama for a year now and already this..."
"Tahiri..."
"Your turn to listen," Tahiri's voice had gone soft, her emotions stabbing at him like daggers. "I'll agree to your plan, but not because I want to. But because I want our kids to remember the type of dad they had if you do die out here. A dad who loved playing hero more than father, who decided that dying for a galaxy that couldn't care less about him was more important than seeing his daughter's wedding, his son's knighting ceremony, and so many other milestones."
"You're not being fair," Anakin gritted out.
"What's not fair is this galaxy, the Force, the Yun'o or whatever mystical force keeps tearing us apart," Tahiri shot back, still glaring at the bulkhead in front of her. "The fact that you think you're going to die out here, that we're both going to die out here if I stay, is really reassuring by the way. You might as well wave a white flag when the Killiks come."
"I'm far from perfect, Tahiri," Anakin said bitingly. "You should know that better than anyone! I ***can't*** *look you in the eyes and promise that I'll survive. I* ***know*** *that most of the people under my command right now are going to die in the months to come. There's no escaping it with the numbers the bugs are throwing at us. No plan can get around that. So I'm sorry to burst your bubble and ruin that 'perfect Jedi' image you bought into, where my plans always work out, but we need to think about the reality of the situation and not the fantasy we want."*
"*You're the one who decided to be 'Anakin Solo Hero of the Jedi Order' all over again, not me," Tahiri growled. "I* ***know*** *you're far from perfect, that's why you need me watching your back. But don't worry,* ***Hero Boy****, I'll go along with your plan just like I've always done."*
"Tah..."
"Just leave, Solo." Tahiri's voice was glacial and eerily quiet. "Go finish rescuing the galaxy. I'll be the good wife and wait at home with our children when you get back."
Anakin buried those emotions, his fatigue and stress of overseeing over a million lives stretched out over three sectors grating his nerves. All those people looking to him to stay alive, all those people trusting him to get them through this suicidal and impossible situation. All the galaxy watching his first real mission as Director of the Galactic Alliance Guard live over the holo-net.

He succeeds and he's a hero, praised, lauded, and showered with more accolades than he could ever want. He'd never be able to stay out of the public eye after that, would be expected to continue with his responsibilities to a greater galaxy. Who cares that the victory would have come at the cost of a mountain of corpses? That hundreds of thousands would have died defending systems greedy and corrupt senators manipulated and milked dry in any case.

He fails, the Killiks run amuck, the nearby un-evacuated systems become the first Joined. He, Jaina, and Jacen would most likely be dead, as well as the newest generation of Jedi. The Jedi Order collapses from the strain, the Galactic Alliance runs around like headless gizkas, and all around badness. Fortunately, since he'd most likely be dead, he wouldn't have to see any of that. Unfortunately, his children would then have to grow up and clean up the giant mess his ego had created.

And most dads just had to worry about changing a dirty nappy and washing dishes when they got home from work. He wished he could say that his argument with Tahiri had blind-sided him. That he hadn't seen it coming. But he couldn't. The more he devoted himself to the galaxy at large, at his fleets and political games, the less time he was spending with his family. As fairy-tale as his relationship with Tahiri seemed, the Swarm War had brought to the front all sorts of hairline fractures that were threatening to rip their family apart.

How was he expected to be a devoted father, loving husband, and Anakin Solo the rakamat driver, if the galaxy wanted him to be Anakin Solo Jedi Knight extraordinaire, savior and hero? It was hard to think that the seven years of bliss on Zonama could be a *bad* thing, but now that he and Tahiri had something to compare their lives to, know what peace and family life could actually be like, the stress of the war was becoming all too unwelcome.

"Good storm cloud impersonation," the voice of Kyp Durron shook Anakin from his thoughts and made the younger Jedi aware he had somehow gotten to the *Sunrider*'s hangar bay. "Think you can do your best solar-eclipse or singularity impression next?"

Anakin acknowledged the Jedi Master with a nod. "Master Durron."

"You know, you *can* call me 'Kyp.' 'Master Durron' makes me sound too pompous."

"Kyp," Anakin rolled his eyes and had to smile slightly. "Thanks for coming. I know it can't be easy leaving the Dozen with Jagged, especially since you just reformed them."

"I go where I'm called, Director Solo," Kyp smirked. "Besides the Wild Knights are with them too and Tesar's a good leader."

"Call me Anakin, 'Director Solo' makes me sound too pompous."

"I assume you have a good reason for pulling me from that nerfcluster-to-come. Not that I didn't enjoy the view of the Utegetu Nebula. Although, between you and me, all those pastels got old after the first few months."
"I need a command crew for the *Falcon* when Welk shows himself," Anakin said evenly, directing them down a side passage.
"You mean you need a scapegoat for when you return the *Falcon* to dad with more than a few dings on it?"
"That too."
"Okay, now the real reason? Why don't you have your friends filling out your command crew? Zekk, Lowbacca, heck your brother and sister?"
"Kyp, meet the other members of the command crew," Anakin said in answer as a door to the conference room opened up.
Kyp blinked at the half-dozen others in the room, then looked at Anakin again. "Aaanakin. Is there a reason why half your command crew is dark Jedi?"
"We've reformed," Lomi Plo said sarcastically, lounging back in her chair with her head resting in the palms of her hands.
Seated next to her was another Nightsister, a granddaughter of the Night Queen Ros Lai, Rena. Pale, emaciated, face tattooed with Dathomiri tribal designs, she smiled a sharp, toothy yellow grin.
"Honest."
"We're on the team because he doesn't care if we live or die or not," her younger brother Quin Lai added.
"I think it is more than that," Singing Mountain Clan Dathomiri Damaya said perceptively.
"Yeah, with Durron here, it confirms it," Waxarn Kel sighed, looking to Anakin resignedly. "You've chosen all of us because we couldn't give a womprat's rear if the 'dark side' is used on the mission."
"Yup," Anakin said simply, immediately getting the attention of the more dark-inclined Force-users.
"I don't think your uncle would approve," Kyp said carefully.
"Fortunately for you, he's hundreds of lightyears away trying to keep that idiot Hamner from becoming Grandmaster."
"You're on board, Durron?"
"The reason better be a good one," Kyp said evenly, taking a seat.
"A simple one," Anakin looked to the others. "The Killiks capable of using the Force are using what most of you would call light and dark side techniques. Their Joiners the same. They aren't constricted by the same ethical quibbles the Jedi and dark Jedi might have. Lomi, Rena,Quin, you might see the techniques the Jedi use as weak, poor substitutions for the power a Sith can wield."

"True," Lomi answered.
"Then why do the Sith keep getting beaten by Jedi methods?" Anakin smiled patiently. "It's the same with the Jedi. The Jedi think they're too good for dark Jedi methods, that it's something to avoid at all cost. The Killiks are taking the best of both, and the only reason why they haven't kicked our collective rears yet is because that hive-mind of theirs isn't focused on doing that. If I take a pure-Jedi team into Welk's flagship, the dark side will get the better of them. If I take a dark Jedi team onboard, that same dark side will influence them in ways that probably won't be good for any of us. A mixed team of Master-level Jedi who know both sides of the Force, who don't shy away from using one or the other, spending time moralizing and arguing about how ''right' a technique is, is what will work."
"Point," Waxarn sighed. "I can see now why Eryl followed you."
"He does know how to get to the heart of the matter," Damaya said, sounding impressed.
"I just want to be clear about something," Lomi spoke, silencing everyone with a brief flash of Force energy. "When we reach Welk, it's my blade that will end him."
"Lomi?" Kyp raised an eyebrow.
"He's my student. Can't have them reflect poorly on my teachings," Lomi said without emotion.
"Fine, he's yours," Anakin said. "The plan is simple for the rest of us, we're going to squish every bug and Joiner that stands between Welk and Lomi."
"No tranq-darts, anti-Joiner serum?" Waxarn voiced.
"It's going to be us versus a ship that's going to be filled with millions of bugs," Anakin answered. "A ship that will more than likely blow up while we're either on it or about to leave it."
"Jedi do have bad track-records with enemy command ships," Damaya agreed. "Not that that's a bad thing. But we always seem to be near the blast radius of the ship when it blows up."
Anakin smiled, but sobered again. "The *Falcon* can barely fit our entire team. We won't have time to evac any Joiners. Think of us taking them out as a mercy-kill."
Kyp very slowly rolled his head to one shoulder and then the other. He then pinned Anakin with a piercing stare. "You've been hanging out with the Vong a bit too long, don't you think, Anakin?"
"In the Yuuzhan Vong War, didn't you justify the killing of all those non-combatant Yuuzhan Vong on that World Ship as 'collateral damage'?" Anakin said. "It's us or them. And I'd rather it be us."

"I can see why most the Masters of your order don't like you," Lomi said in amusement.
Quin raised an eyebrow, his experiences with Sanola Ti allowing him to understand Anakin on a different level. "But you *are* walking on that very narrow middle-ground between dark and light. If you're not careful Director Solo, you could alienate yourself from the Jedi Order."
"I'd have to be alive to do that," Anakin answered back. "The Denon government has given me next to nothing in support out here. It's only because Jaina and Jacen control two galactic powerhouses that we have the numbers we have. I'll worry about what's light and dark, right and wrong, when I have the luxury to do so."
"A shame you're not the Grandmaster of your Order," Lomi said casually, going back to reclining in her chair. "I know a couple of people you should probably get in touch with."
"I'll pass," Anakin said dryly. "Remember Lomi, Tenel Ka is only lending you out. You're still property of Her Majesty's government."
"She did plant an explosive at the base of my skull, hard to forget," Lomi snarked, rubbing the fresh scar at the back of her head.
"You *are* a dark Jedi who betrayed her and left her and her friends for dead, Lomi," Damaya chided her fellow Dathomiri Force-user.
"Some people need to get over the past," Lomi said, shaking her head. "Anyways, you don't need to worry about me Solo. Once as queen of the bugs is enough for me."
"Why do you think I asked for you, Lomi?" Anakin leaned forward, making eye-contact with the others—most over a decade or two older than him. "Just remember this all of you. While we fight our way through Welk's ship, thousands of soldiers will be dying. The quicker we end this war the quicker we can go back to our normal lives."
"Here, here," Rena tilted her head.
"I can agree to that," Kyp acknowledged.
"Same," Lomi concurred.
Waxarn snorted. "And Director Solo has done the impossible, getting insane Jedi and Sith to agree on something."
"You're right," Kyp groaned. "We're definitely doomed."
-)[-Chapter End-](-

Unknown Regions
-)[-I-](-
Syal Antilles stared emotionlessly out at the void of the Utegetu Nebula, her right leg bouncing uncontrollably. Sweat beaded on her forehead beneath her flight-helmet as the lights from her cockpit controls illuminated her face. Her hand clenched and unclenched

around the throttle of her fully loaded Eta-Five Interceptor, breathing shallow and slow.
"*Doing okay over there, Five?*" Lujayne Darklighter asked over the private channel.
"Good to go," Syal replied robotically.
"*I'm not losing another friend*."
"I'm good to go, sir," Syal repeated. She mentally reflected that they'd probably all be dead before the month was out. How nice of the higher ups to plan a suicide mission for them.
"*All wings last go-no-go check. Killik forces have just hit the perimeter beacons and will be here in ten*." The voice of the Eternal Dynast's comm-operator tightened nerves even further.
"VibroSword Five, go," Syal said when her turn came around. She tuned out the readiness report for the rest of her squad, trying not to dwell on the fact that it might be the last time she would hear their voices.
As the last of the squadrons and wings reported in, Syal felt a blanket of unnatural calm descend upon her. Her leg stopped bouncing, her grip on the steering yoke relaxed, and she released an even breath. Where her thoughts had been racing lightseconds a minute, and her vision tunneled from over-focus, everything appeared to become clear once more. Her thoughts organized themselves into logical patterns, her field of vision widened, and her determination to see this battle through trumped her bitterness.
Syal couldn't help but smirk, the Force was one hell of a drug. "Let's go burn some bugs, VibroSwords."
"*I'm with you, Five*." Her wingman reported with similar confidence.
The Jedi in their fleet continued to bolster their resolve, like waves washing over a beach, the Force took away any doubt, any second-guessing, with every pass. She briefly wondered if her father was nervous as well, but pushed those thoughts aside. He was commanding another couple wings of fighters in a different part of the Utegetu Nebula, the reserve force. Not that keeping any fighters back would help them. Syal had to admit, that even with the Jedi calm soothing her nerves, the plan put into motion by her cousin, Moff Fel, was definitely insane.
"*This is Dozen Reborn Lead. We'll be the spear-point.*"
"*Lucky you guys*," the voice of the lead pilot of Hardpoint squadron—another all Jedi squadron—said in turn. "*Too bad we have to follow you in*."
The Galactic Alliance force waited in the swirling clouds of the Utegetu Nebula, anticipation building as the seconds slowly ticked by. The

bright white light from the Tusken's Eye casted a shadowy backdrop of the massive force of fighters against the multi-hued surroundings of the nebula. Though not the largest fleet in history, it certainly made the top ten as several thousand starfighters of various makes, from various governments, sat in disciplined formation with all sorts of warheads armed and ready.

And then they saw it, a multitude of explosions all across the opposite wall of the nebula as the vanguard of the Killik fleet rammed into the minefield hidden by the various clouds of opaque gas and spacedust. Like fireworks on Life Day, the display went on for several long seconds, pieces of ruined Killik vessels sent in ballistic courses every which way. The pilots all held their breath, wondering who in their right minds would try to brute-force their way through such a deadly field of ordnance. They knew the truth, however. Just as they had seen on Hapes, Denon, and so many other places around the galaxy, the loss of one, two, or even a hundred wouldn't even faze a hive of millions.

The Killiks began firing in synchronized unison, the flashes of light illuminating the nebula changing in nature as hundreds, thousands of lasers cleared the rest of the minefield with effortless ease. And then the prows of the first Shard cruisers poked through the protective bubble the nebula had offered.

"*Remember the plan. Save your ordnance*," coached Lujayne. "*Let the bombers have first crack at those things*."

Syal found herself exhaling as she watched the waves of TIE Bombers, Y-Wings, and B-Wings surge forward to greet the emerging Killik fleet. Heavy-rockets, proton torpedoes, ion bombs, enough heavy-weapons to obliterate the surface of a medium-sized planet were fired off at once. One after another, after another, after another, as fast as the pilots could acquire a target and squeeze the trigger. It was a frightening, awe-inspiring sight. Knowing that all that destructive energy was being released at once and at one enemy. The bombers emptied their payloads and beat a hasty retreat back to friendly lines. But the seconds the warheads needed to travel seemed to stretch on indefinitely as the Shard cruisers continued to enter the nebula. Large Nebulon-B sized cruisers, half-Star Destroyer half-Bakuran frigate, hybridized Mon Calamari shells, ships of all make and design that looked so familiar yet off at the same time. They arrived in a wide net-like formation, stretching all four dimensions of space, seemingly endless in nature. They just continued to come. One after another, after another, and another.

Despite the Force acting as her anti-anxiety drug, Syal could feel her mouth dry at the sheer numbers coming through the nebula wall. Like

a massive navy of old parting the morning fog, the Killik fleet seemed to stretch on and on. What had started off as an impressive barrage of hundreds of deadly missiles began to look more like a tiny bee-sting against an enraged ursine.
The missiles impacted with expected results, downing dozens of capital ships in dramatic explosions and chain-reactions. More Killik vessels broke apart, holes in the Killik formation appearing for precious few seconds before another Killik vessel emerged into the nebula and took the place of its destroyed counterpart.
"*Hell, is there no end to them?*" Syal heard another pilot whisper in terror.
She had to agree. Despite a mine, torpedo, and rocket barrage that would have decimated a normal fleet, it looked as if the Killik fleet hadn't even been scratched.
"*Don't worry everyone, they're not keeping anything back*," came the voice of their Jedi Meld coordinator, Avinoam Arelis—his day job being a Jedi Knight assigned to assist in the rebuilding of the Remnant.
"*We're getting all four hundred and sixty-two Killik capital ships at once.*"
"*Less now,"* the *Dozen Reborn* lead said, his Force presence reaching out to help bolster those intimidated by the sheer scale of the Killik fleet. "*That last barrage took out a few dozen*."
"*Stay alert, enemy fighters being launched*," the Eternal Dynast coordinator reported.
And then Syal really did feel her mouth grow dry. She had fought in the Utegetu Nebula before, once upon a time when she had been a green pilot. But fighting unorganized pirates flying bastardized starfighter designs was a whole lot different than what she was up against now. Like organic tentacles stretching out from the Shard cruisers, rivers of dartfighters poured out of dozens of capital ships, easily outnumbering what the Galactic Alliance had fielded after only a few seconds.
"*Ouch time,*" Brun Garix muttered.
Again, in the unison afforded to them by their hive-mind, the thousands of disposable Killik fighters released a hailstorm of projectile and laser bolts. In their tightly packed formation, the assault looked like singular beams of light cutting through the nebula from each column of dartfighters.
"*Break formation and engage!*" the command came. And hundreds of GA fighters accelerated and dove into the mass of clouds swirling all around them.
The Corporate Sector's droid fighters were sent out first, followed by the myriad of Jedi squadrons and others who had the misfortune to

lead the charge. The assault was swift and brutal, laser cannons firing until the barrels began to glow from the heat. Quad-cannons, rapid-fire dual blasters, powerful single-gunned starfighters, all the colors in the rainbow seemed to stream outwards at the extending tentacles of the Killik fleet. Anyone who hadn't yet reached 'ace' status yet did so in mere seconds.

Tentacles were rebuffed, shortened, hundreds of the unshielded dartfighters succumbing to the concentrated barrage and taking others out with them as they exploded in the tightly packed Killik formations. That was enough for the Killiks, who promptly had the tentacles disperse into thick black clouds of enemy fighters. Said fighters quickly orientated themselves towards the attacking force and charged.

Syal watched the first wave of attackers engage the Killiks with some sympathy. Only a Jedi would be brave enough to volunteer to take the brunt of thousands of enemy guns. But she pushed those thoughts away as it became her squad's turn to enter the fray. Attacking from above, the VibroSwords and twelve other starfighter squadrons roared out of the gas cloud they had been hiding in and pounced on the flank of the enemy fighter force.

Her mind kept unnaturally calm, Syal methodically fired off her laser cannons at pretty much anything in the expanse before her. It was like throwing a rock into the ocean, she was bound to hit water. The other hundred-plus fighters around her did the same, lighting up the Killiks with ruthless efficiency. It was almost too easy.

The Killiks then reminded the GA forces that they had many more of them than the GA had. More barrages of enemy laser and projectile fire screamed unexpectedly out of a second wave of dartfighters. The back half of Syal's formation was obliterated in an instant, over sixty fighters disappearing in the barrage.

"We got hostiles on our six!" Syal called out, her astromech shrieking as another barrage of laser and projectile fire nearly consumed their fighter. Having hundreds of dartfighters fire in unison at *you* wasn't exactly something you wanted. "They're after me now, breaking formation. Six, stay with the others."

Syal sent her agile craft on a sharp turn, beams of light illuminating her canopy as some part of the hive-mind decided to kill her next. She saw several other tentacles of dartfighters chase after other fighters and promptly stitched the nearest one with laser fire. The upside was that it was no longer firing on her fellow pilots. On the downside, she now had two tendrils of enemy fighters seeking her eminent death. She barrel-rolled, seeing her fighter's armored plating spark as mag-rounds and other metal projectiles blew deep pock-marks in it. As she flew, in

her rear sensors she saw that the two tendrils of Killik fighters had merged into one big one.
"All to kill me? You shouldn't have," Syal remarked grimly. As she performed another breakneck maneuver to save her life, her vision caught something. "Control, V-Sword Five, only the fighters are attacking. I wonder what those cruisers are waiting for."
"*Being analyzed now, Five*."
Syal clenched her jaw. While it was being analyzed to death, the GA fighters were being slaughtered. She headed for the nearest Shard cruiser, a round-shape vessel that looked to be a cross between a Gallofree transport and a Lancer frigate. The ship's laser cannons began tracking her as she approached.
"Oh, this is going to be fun," Syal muttered, ignoring the warning that her shields were about to fail. She squeezed the trigger again, sending out bolts of energy splashing against the cruiser.
Said cruiser immediately unleashed a barrage of destructive energy in her direction. But she had already made a sharp climb and the turbolasers slammed into the column of enemy fighters pursuing her, blowing gaping holes where darfighters had once been. Both the column and turbolasers continued to follow her suicidal run, the column becoming less in number as her maneuvers grew more reckless. She made another sharp dive, firing again on the cruiser, and then sharply bouncing her fighter almost along the surface of the ship. The dartfighters, faster but far less maneuverable, couldn't turn up in time. The cruiser, no matter how well made it was, wasn't able to stand a hundred of the missile-shaped craft plow into its side.
Syal swerved away just as the ship erupted in a giant fireball, grinning at her victory. She wondered how the mechanics were going to draw several hundred fighters on the side of her canopy and was about to re-engage when she heard something that had her stomach drop.
"*We've lost V-Sword Lead! We've lost V-Sword Lead*!" VibroSword Two squawked in panic.
"What? How?!"
"*There's too many of…!*" VibroSword Two's response ended in static. And he wasn't the only one. Chiming out over the channel, GA pilots were dying by the squadron, the brilliant hued nebula becoming their graveyard.
Syal glanced back at the cruisers, finally understanding the Killik's thinking. The cruisers weren't engaging because they didn't need to. Another cluster of dartfighters broke away from the main fight and headed in her direction. Personal victory aside, she didn't need a Jedi to know that the battle wasn't going well.

And it had only just begun.

-)[-II-](-

Moff Jagged Fel of the newly created Chiss Sector grimly scanned the reports coming in after the first couple hours of engagement. He had kept his few capital ships back to make them less of a target, but at the same time his fighter-squadrons had gotten the Kessel beaten out of them. It was a good thing that his plan to keep everyone else alive didn't call for any more straight-up fights. His forces simply couldn't take the losses they did and hope to win in the long-run. In fact, he normally wouldn't have had his fighter wings engage such an overwhelming force, but the Killiks had known to expect *some* resistance. To not put any fighters at all would have clued the Killiks in to some type of trap and made them stray from the course the Jedi were trying to get them to stay on. But all the logic in the world didn't reverse the fact that many good people had died for the feint to keep the bugs interested.

"These are the final counts," an officer handed him a datapad, striding with the Moff along the main walkway of the bridge.

Jagged gave it a cursory once-over, compartmentalizing his emotions. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Sir, the fight was your victory. We've inflicted close to thirty-three percent casualties on the forces the Killiks brought to bear while losing only a quarter of our forces in turn. The Killiks have even stopped their advance to secure the entry-systems of the nebula."

"Flight Officer Draco," Jagged called out to the Imperial Jedi seated on the bridge. "Explain to the good lieutenant why this isn't a victory."

"They can afford to lose thirty-three percent, sir," Antalia replied, eyes closed, still in a kneeling position by the forward viewport. "Most of those were fighter-loses. Nearly eighty-percent of their capital-ship capabilities remain. In exchange we fielded only fighters against them, pretty much have only fighters to resist the Killik fleet."

"As she says," Jagged gestured, knowing that the situation was making him look grim and dour. How could he not? In a span of two hours, over four hundred pilots had lost their lives.

"In any case, the Killiks have slowed their advance for now. They'll buy us time as they try to inhabit the planets in the nebula."

"Again, to our detriment," Jagged said. "It only takes a year or two for them to grow full-grown warriors. Far less to build their signature ships. The more breathing room we have, the longer they have to rebuild. We can hide in these clouds of gas and dust as long as we want, but we would only be hurting ourselves."

"But with our current numbers…"

"You're dismissed, Lieutenant."
"Sir," the officer saluted and hastily hurried away.
Jagged stared out the viewport at the swirling motes of gas and dust, a plan formulating in his mind. One that his father would grimace at but his uncle would be proud of. After a few minutes of thought, he very calmly walked over to the seated Imperial Jedi. "You are fighter-rated are you not, Imperial Jedi Draco?"
"I am, sir. Both my brother and myself have over five-hundred simulator hours, half that in the cockpit of a TIE Starhunter. We also…"
"That's sufficient." Jagged said briskly. "Come with me."
"But, sir," her brown eyes were puzzled as she rose to her feet. "The meld?"
"There are only skirmishes occurring, and Jedi Knight Avinoam is capable enough," Jagged said. He flipped a datapad to a nearby comm-operator. "See to it that the pilots I listed are transferred to the *Eternal Dynast* by tomorrow. And request that General Antilles contact me at his earliest convenience."
"Sir," the officer nodded.
Jagged heard no comment from the young Jedi following him. "Jedi Draco. Get some rest, brush up on your flight-manual. You'll be my wingman."
"You're going out personally, sir?"
"That is correct. I would not order my pilots to do something I would not."
"But you're the leader of this sector."
"I work better leading at the front," Jagged answered back, hiding a smile.
"The plan, sir?"
"Get some rest," Jagged repeated. "I know that the Battle Meld can be extremely draining, especially if there is great loss of life involved. The Jedi squadrons lost seven pilots total, and that could not have been easy to feel."
"The former Inquisitorious members taught us that such pain is a part of life, sir. To be embraced and not shunned."
"These were the same instructors who once thought that mass-murder and racial cleansing was a good idea," Jagged reminded. "It's okay to learn from them as long as you realize that what they were taught were twisted views of the way the galaxy should be."
"Yes, sir. Then…it was…difficult, sir. Up until now the deaths I've felt were non-Jedi. To be in a Jedi's mind as he or she dies…it's very disconcerting."
"It will not be the last time."

"I know, sir. But we all have a duty to the galaxy, to the Empire. Our own opinions on the matter are moot."
"And if I wanted a protocol droid agreeing with everything I said, I would get one," Jagged said patiently. She was, after all, a few months shy of sixteen and had been brainwashed to serve the Empire as a loyal puppet. "You're allowed to feel emotion in the Empire, in the Jedi Order, so long as you are careful who you reveal said emotions to. For future reference, I'd much prefer to know that the deaths of so many comrades had a negative impact on the one guarding my six, than not."
"Yes, sir," Antalia said dutifully. Then reading his mind, preempted him. "I'll get some rest now, sir."
"See that you do."
They parted ways at a junction, with Jagged heading towards the medical wing and Antalia towards the crew-quarters. A few turbolift rides and hallways later, the doors to the packed med-bay whooshed open.
All thirty bacta tanks in the room were completely full, treating everything from severe burns and dismemberment to vacuum exposure and shrapnel wounds. The bleeps and bloops of the vital-sign monitors worked together in a morbid aria as the miracle fluids and squad of med-droids did their best to keep the near-fatally wounded pilots alive.
"Lieutenant Antilles," Jagged said coolly, coming to stand behind his cousin.
"Moff Fel," the younger woman answered, her almost emotionless gaze fixated on the tank of her squadron leader and best friend. Very few could survive being engulfed in a fireball and vented into the void of space, and Lujayne Darklighter wasn't exactly an exception. Her vital-monitors showed close to zero brain activity and the magnifying effect of the bacta made her full-body injuries look about as bad as they were.
"I read a report, you deactivate a med-droid that wanted to use her tank for another pilot. Two droids in fact, with the second one receiving severe blaster damage."
"She's still alive, sir," Syal said stubbornly.
"I am not debating that," Jagged said, his hands clasped behind his back.
"Get a Jedi to fix her," Syal spun around, looking at her cousin mutinously, almost little-girl like despite her twenty years of age. "They were the ones who got us into this mess. Made me not care about what

had happened to Lujayne until the kriffing battle was over. Where are they now?"
Jagged saw the eyes of the many med-bay visitors dart in his direction. Despite being his cousin, Syal was still only a lowly fighter pilot and he a sector Moff. How was he going to take obvious insubordination? "I believe they are on the *Paladin*, awaiting their turn to use the bacta tanks, Lieutenant. Seven were killed, another eight were grievously wounded and are barely sustaining themselves with their healing trances. Those available are ensuring that those eight don't succumb to said wounds. There are also over a hundred other fighter-pilots with moderate to severe injuries, all with a better chance of surviving than Lieutenant Darklighter."
"She can still recover," Syal said almost plaintively, her tired blue eyes showing the stain of the past few hours. "She's not dead."
"I am forming an attack squadron," Jagged said, changing topics. "And your presence on it will be appreciated."
Syal blinked, her tired mind trying to catch up. "Sir?"
"We cannot let the Killiks get comfortable with the territory they've taken," Jagged said smoothly. "You want to honor the cause Lieutenant Darklighter fought for, this is your chance. Not sitting in front of her bacta tank and moping."
"If I leave, the droids will disconnect her," Syal scowled.
"They probably will," Jagged said.
Syal's eyes narrowed. "And what are you going to do about it, Moff Fel?"
"Abuse my power and move both her and her bacta tank onto a transport to the nearest advanced medical facility, consequently in the Chiss sector," Jagged answered. "I am already shipping twenty others back due to the nature of their wounds. Captain Darklighter's injuries warrant grouping her with the others."
"Swear it," Syal hissed.
Jagged raised an eyebrow. "Lieutenant?"
"My dad taught me that an Imperial's word was barely worth the breath it was used to say it."
"Strange, my father taught me the same, only using Rebels instead of Imperials," Jagged quipped back. "But she will be returned to civilized space, this I swear, Lieutenant."
Syal just nodded. "Thank you, sir."
"Your assignment and orders," Jagged handed her a datapad. He'd worry about accusations of nepotism later. "Go to your station."
"Yes, sir."
-)[-III-](-

To be back in a starfighter again was the best therapy one could prescribe him after several days of impatiently pacing on the bridge of his Star Destroyer listening to the bad news come in. His *Nssis*-Clawcraft's chair felt ever so familiar, as did the slightly cramped spherical cockpit and throttle controls. Even if the engagement he was about to fly in would last all of twenty minutes should things go right, it was a twenty minutes he had long been denied since being promoted. The squadron, made up of three Jedi, his Imperial Jedi included, and skilled veterans, had a simple task—revive the soul of the Rebellion by hitting the much larger and heavily armed Killik fleet. Said fleet was currently massing in the Sarm system, no doubt picking clean any metal and mineral resources from the barren planets it contained.
"This is Twinsins Lead," Jagged said evenly, the squadron's name a deliberate play-on-words of his Yuuzhan Vong War era squad. "Targeting telemetry from the probes coming in. You know the drill. Drop out of hyperspace, fire your torps, then leap away again. No heroics."
"*Roger, sir.*" His wingman, Antalia Draco confirmed. The others in the squadron following suit.
"Comm-silence after we jump. Jump on my mark. Three, two, one, mark," Jagged hit the hyperspace controls of his fighter and the colorful expanse of the nebula became a blur to his eyes for a couple of seconds.
When the surroundings reverted, Jagged was treated to a view of the monstrous Killik fleet. From what he could see, they were already hard at work breaking apart one of the moons on a distant planet, harvesting the liquid core as it flowed out and cooled in the void of space.
The rest of his squadron arrived and he promptly refocused, his targeting solution already set by the probes he had positioned on the outer edge of the system.
In any other engagement, deliberately targeting non-military ships would probably constitute a war-crime. But when the enemy was one whole mind directing individual parts, was there such thing as a non-military ship? Jagged glanced at the countdown timer, knowing that it was in sync with the timers on the other fighters. The Killik fleet either failed to see them or dismissed the lone fighter squadron as not being a threat.
Jagged breathed out again, that dismissal was about to change in a heart-beat.
The timer reached zero and twenty-four warheads roared out of the chambers of the lone squadron. And then another twenty-four. Without

even seeing the result, the fighters promptly performed a one-eighty and leaped back into hyperspace.
The missiles they had fired continued on their deadly course. They didn't target the heavy cruisers, the anti-fighter tenders, or anything that bristled with dartfighters or weaponry. In fact, these rockets zipped right by them.
Transport ships carrying thousands of hive-tending drones and larva, light cruisers laden with Killiks specializing in resource and mining, ships identified by the Jedi as having 'command bugs' onboard, the social infrastructure of the hives, soon found themselves in the cross-hairs of the missile barrage. Explosions rippled through the once serene Killik fleet, sending dartfighters and cruisers scattering every which way searching for the threat. Though the attackers weren't on hand to witness the destruction, they effectively kicked over the termite mound with their dual salvo. But by then, the attackers were long gone.
Jagged's squadron emerged with all persons accounted for back at their small fleet hidden in the gaseous nebula. Checking his sensors to make sure that no one had been left behind, Jagged released a breath of relief and reclined in his chair. So began the hopefully months' long game of 'poke the hornet's nest and run away.' The Utegetu Nebula was only so big, however, and their enemies numerous. They would need timing and a great deal of luck to make it to the end of the war intact. Fortunately or not, Jagged had plenty more in his bag of tricks, whether it was from his experiences fighting in the Yuuzhan Vong War, or the plethora of knowledge he had in the form of General Wedge Antilles, he was fairly confident they could last as long as Anakin Solo needed them to.
But nothing was certain. All it took was one misstep, the Killiks corning them in one corner of the nebula, and it was game over.
In the brief moment he let his autopilot take him into the hangar, Jagged closed his eyes and briefly wondered how Jaina and the others were doing.

-)[-IV-](-

Jaina Solo wondered if the Force truly gave a damn about all the innocent people she was trying to save. There were still close to a quarter of a million Geroon civilians on the planet, but she had simply run out of time. She could no longer worry about them, it was time for her to be the Sword of the Jedi once more. Clad in her traditional robes, Jaina mentally prepared herself with what little time she had. The outer sensor buoys had reported that the Killiks were coming, and coming in hot. And with numbers that created odds no Corellian would ever take.

Releasing one last breath, she called out to the holographic images projected in the alcove next to her.
"Loiric, Reige, Ariarsh, Irolia, report the readiness of your fleets."
"*We're as ready as we're going to be, Jedi Solo,*" Vitor Reige said evenly. He was with a fleet of aging Star Destroyers and cruisers bolstered by Chiss frigates and Vagaari fire-ships.
"*[All is in readiness.]*" Ariarsh reported from the bridge of his Vagaari Super-cruiser. Backing his motley array of saucer-shaped vessels were the sleek lines of Chiss Star Destroyers and Imperial missile-ships.
"*All units reporting in*," acknowledged the Assistant Syndic, the bridge of the Chiss Star Destroyer *Flames of Ascendance* busy with a multitude of crewmen performing their tasks. Wings of TIE Starhunters, Defenders, and other Imperial fightercraft swarmed in perfect formation with the Chiss *Nssis*-Clawcraft and Vagaari saucer-shaped fighters. Backing these ships up were the heavy hitting Matalok and middle-weight Miid ro'iks of Loiric Kaan's fleet.
Loiric Kaan was last to report in, his villip representation grunting and nodding in affirmative. His own fleet was made up of Yuuzhan Vong and Vagaari vessels and was their trump card so to speak.
Jaina just saluted each of them and turned the comm off, her face masking the anxiety she felt as she walked the length of the bridge towards the viewports. This was going to be a slug-fest no matter what. It didn't matter that she was on the bridge of the Super Star Destroyer *Megador*, assigned to her taskforce by her brother and procured by the political-veteran Pellaeon. She didn't want to know what backroom favors had been traded to have such a symbolic representation of power shipped so far away from the Galactic Core, but she knew that she probably should return said super cruiser back to the Core intact.
"Killik fleet has entered the system, will be in firing range in T-minus five minutes and counting," a sensor operator chimed in.
"Fighterwings One through Five are ready."
"Shields up and operating at peak efficiency."
"Turbolaser and ion batteries all functional and acquiring targeting solutions."
"Fleet groups are standing by, all report green."
"Droid-fighters are receiving, ready to engage on your go."
The *Megador*'s bridge was a hive of activity, voices over voices, each reporting to their section leader with the oiled efficiency one would expect from a military vessel. Jaina, hands clasped at the small of her back, continued to stare out the viewport.
"Deploy droid fighters and suicide drones," Jaina ordered.

"Ma'am! You should see this."
Jaina moved to the console involved and blinked. She recognized what she was seeing from all of the media coverage of the first Battle of the Utegetu Nebula two years earlier. "You have to be kidding me. Another Pulsar Station?"
"That's what it looks like, ma'am."
"Are the other fleet groups receiving this?"
"Yes, ma'am."
"*Any change in p*lans?" Vitor asked.
"Keep our cruisers away from it. I doubt the Killiks left the same vulnerabilities in place this time around. And it's fully armed, armored, and operational so no flying into it with snubfighters."
"*The old fashion way then*?" Irolia said. "*Blast it until it falls apart*?"
"We'd use too much ordnance on it. Have our tactical computers and engineers analyze every reading we get from that thing. We'll probably lose a lot of good people before we find out how to crack that shell."
Jaina ran a hand through her hair, racking her brain for ideas. "If the Killiks move with that thing in front, we'll have no choice but to engage it. But if they don't, just keep your distance. We all saw the vids and how easy the first one blasted through a Mon Cal cruiser. Worse comes to worse, I'll ram this ship into it."
"*I don't think the Galactic Alliance stiffs on Denon will appreciate it*," Vitor said dryly. "*It might hurt your chances of being loaned a Super-class Star Destroyer in the future*."
"If it comes down to it, I probably won't have much of a future left," Jaina replied sarcastically. "I'll accept any other plan in the mean time."
The sensor operator behind her called out. "Killiks have entered minimum effective firing range."
"Good luck, Admiral," Jaina said to the hologram.
"*You too, Jedi Solo. Okay crew! All units fire when ready*!"
For someone who had spent nearly every fight in her life on the frontlines, be it in a starfighter or on the ground on Vagar Praxut, Jaina was not used to watching things from afar. But that was what she found herself doing on the bridge of the Super Star Destroyer as Admiral Reige's fleet group emerged out from behind the last planet in the system and unloaded on the Killik fleet's flank.
Several dozen capital ships versus several hundred.
The Killiks responded instantly, withering fire poured down onto the attacker. Admiral Reige played a game of tag, using the planet as a shield against most of the incoming fire. Even then, Jaina saw the status indicator of the ships in his fleet change as a Star Destroyer and three Chiss frigates were blown apart. A portion of the Killik fleet

peeled off to pursue Vitor's fleet, looking almost like a living blaze of flame as the Killik fleet undulated and shifted to accommodate the detachment.
"Decloak the droid-fleet," Jaina commanded, referring to a joint Chiss-Vagaari-Imperial project involving Imperial know-how, Vagaari resources, and Chiss tech that had been bundled together by the group's science divisions.
Cloaking technology was generally extremely rare due to the lack of stygium and hibridium crystals needed to power any cloaking devices. The cloaking generators that were available were extremely expensive, covered only small areas, and gave off immense amount of radiation inside the cloaked bubble. The knowledge was there, just not the resources needed to implement it.
That's where the Vagaari's extensive knowledge of the Unknown Region came in. Crystals with similar properties were well known by the Vagaari, the molecular structure close enough to stygium that Chiss crystal-tech could modify them to work with the Imperial specifications. Unfortunately, time and resource constraints meant that only small, fighter-sized generators could be made. These generators were mounted on Imperial droid fighters for the sole reason that the Imperials already had droid packages equipped to handle cloaking technologies so new programs didn't have to be written.
And now the glowing example of former foes working together to defeat a common enemy was put into play in the form of probably one of the most expensive suicide forces ever.
The couple hundred droid fighters decloaked on the opposite side of the Killik fleet and opened fire with their single warhead and dual laser cannons. The Killik fleet, which had reflexively rotated its most important ships away from Admiral Reige's surprise attack, were caught flatfooted once more as the automated fighters swarmed.
Blazes of fire, flashes of light, and debris spinning off in every direction, the Killik fleet retaliated once more. A whole host of dartfighters peeled off their carriers, while modified TIEs and a sundry of other fighters roared out of hangar bays to meet this new challenger.
"See if we can't cloak them and save them for another day," Jaina commanded.
The droid fleet turned invisible at the push of a button, but the Killiks continued to fire.
"Still suffering from the same drawbacks," the operator shook his head. "The bugs are locked onto their magnetic signatures."
"It was worth a try. Begin immolation phase."

The surviving droid fighters all targeted medium and light Killik vessels and screamed towards them without any regard for their own safety. Seconds passed, and the Killik fleet was definitely bloodied as several dozen of its support ships were downed by collision after collision.
"Killik fleet is halting its advance."
"I would too if I just lost a sizable chunk of my fleet with nothing to show for it," Jaina smirked.
"Energy readings intensifying from the Pulsar Station. It's going to open fire."
"But the Killiks still have ships searching for Admiral Reige's fleet," another protested in confusion.
Feeling a pit grow in her stomach, Jaina hastily reached over to the comm. "Admiral Reige, get your fleet away from that planet now!"
The Pulsar Station rotated towards the ball of dirt that was shielding Reige's fleet and three of its super-laser nodes fired at once.
"I guess they've solved the power problems," Jaina whispered, watching in a mixture of amazement and fear as the Pulsar Station's power plowed into the planet's surface and burrowed through towards the core. In the blink of an eye, the entire planet was ripped apart as if a bomb had gone off at its center. The few moons it had were caught in the explosion and likewise ruptured like overripe melons. The Killik vessels that had been in the region disappeared in the blast, not even making any attempt to escape.
Silence followed the impressive display, the fate of Admiral Reige's fleet only one of many things going through everyone's mind.
"Report," Jaina finally managed. "Admiral Reige, report."
"*Still here*," the holographic image of the admiral flickered back into view. "*Barely*."
"What's your status?" Jaina asked.
The admiral looked to have suffered a nasty gash on his forehead. "*Down and out of the fight. Lost half my fleet group with another quarter badly damaged. We couldn't even leap to hyperspace because of the planet's gravity shadow*."
"Get clear then," Jaina nodded, breath coming slightly easier. "It's Irolia's turn anyways."
The Chiss raised an eyebrow. "*Your faith in me is flattering. But my ships cannot repel firepower of that magnitude*."
"Well, the Killiks are still holding position, so we can use that time to come up with something," Jaina exhaled, running a hand through her frazzled hair. "Really, there should be a manual for taking down annoying superweapons by now."
-)[-V-](-

Concealed beneath an outcropping of Ilum mountainside, General Jedi Knight Zekk stared through the electrobinoculars, his face stony. He couldn't really complain about the attack plan because he was the one who came up with the plan. Didn't mean he had to like it though. In the distance, across fields of dirt and ice, Killik dropships were landing soldiers and Joiners by the hundreds. The Galactic Alliance ground forces held their positions, and their fire. More dropships arrived, unloaded, departed, in a never-ending cycle. With the electrobinoculars, the valley the Killiks were landing in looked a lot closer than comfortable. The worst part was, his plan involved them getting much closer.
"That's a lot of bugs," Taryn breathed next to him.
"Yeah," Zekk agreed, setting the binoculars down. "Ready for this?"
"I'm Hapan, I was born ready to kick butt and slay things for Hapes," Taryn remarked with patently false bravado. She then groaned. "Why did I have to be so good to be put on the most elite team again?"
"Blame your twin," Zekk suggested.
"Good idea, Trista, it's your fault."
Trista just sighed, and pitched her voice so it sounded exactly like Taryn's. "'Come on sister! I bet we can meet loads of hot Jedi as Hapan Commandos because we'd always be out in the field! And we can help our cousin at too! Duty and pleasure at the same time, how can you beat that?'"
"I hate your memory," Taryn grumbled.
"You actually said that?" Zekk said in amusement. "Weren't you, what, eleven, twelve?"
"Not a word," Taryn said, wagging a finger at her lover. Then more mulishly. "Besides, it worked."
"She said that. It was on Tatooine," Trista confirmed. "As if chasing after 'hot Jedi' was ever a legitimate reason to join the Royal Guard."
"I thought you girls decided to become members of the *chume'doro* long before meeting me."
"Before you, it was the Captain of the Guard she idolized," Trista elaborated, ignoring the death glare her sister was giving her. "She had signed holo-posters and everything."
"Trista!" Taryn squawked.
"You do keep telling me to be less of a Dug," Trista reminded.
"Yeah but not now!"
"Captain Shana Vess?" Chiri said, pausing to think for a moment.
"Yeah, I can see that. She was pretty awesome. Pretty in general too. She was also my role model for signing up."
"Was?" Zekk noted.

"Killed at Dac," Taryn supplied softly. "She was on the lower half of the Queen Mother's ship when the Vong raked it with plasma."
"Oh," Zekk said.
A flare went up into the air.
"Well, that's our signal," now Captain Nyrani Lovett said. "Just want to let you all know, in case this is our last run together, it's been a pleasure fighting with you."
"Back at you, captain," Chiri saluted, then pulled on her snow-goggles.
"Think positive, sir," Taryn quipped, the sound of hundreds of speederbikes starting up muffled her words.
Zekk likewise checked his own bike, and then checked his pack of munitions strapped behind him. "What she said, captain."
"Never hurts to be careful."
"We're about to ride into a horde of murderous bugs, what's careful about that?" Chiri asked, adjusting her weapons.
A solemn atmosphere descended over the frontline as everyone took one last look at the mass of enemy they'd be going up again and heard the distant roars of the flesh-hungry creatures. The silence was broken by a single voice.
"And into the valley of shadow we ride," Ryadii Skela murmured. She raised two hands towards the heavens, then brought them over her chest, her head briefly bowed.
"The *Chume's* word we abide," another of the Royal Guardswomen spoke.
"Blaster and vibroblade our arms, our faith in the Royal House our shield," Chiri voiced in turn, her head similarly bowed. The next words being spoken by a multitude of Royal Guardswomen. "May we fight to the death and never yield."
Zekk glanced up and down the line of speeders, seeing that all the Royal Guardswomen murmuring the words in turn. "Taryn?"
The red-haired warrior looked uncomfortable and said in a low voice. "I told you before Zekk, the Queen Mother of ages past turned the Royal Family into a religious cult. Given how our entire society revolves around the Royal Family…religion might not be a big thing these days but there are still hold-overs from when the Royal Family was made out to be this divine family. The *Chume'doro Tahesok,* the Royal Guard's Vow, is one of the aspects of that religion."
"Our lives are not our own, but extensions of the will of Her Majesty. To live or die Her desire," Nyrani said with the hundred others. "Her enemies those we put to the fire."
As one, the Royal Guard turned their gazes back towards the heavens, where Tenel Ka's ship was. "*Chume*, our lives we gladly give for you.

Our Houses be blessed by your rule for this opportunity, we of the *Chume'doro*. And if the shadows take us, know that we have died with a smile on our face and gladness in our hearts to have lain down our lives for you. For the Royal Family, for Hapes!"

Zekk gunned the engine to his speederbike, leading the charge towards the valley below. Behind him thousands of other speederbikes —Corellian, Hutt, and a myriad of other systems adding their troops to the Hapan spear-point—accelerated in turn, roaring across the expanse of frozen ground without hesitation. Above, artillery shells from both sides screamed in competition with one and other. Explosions erupted all around them, all around the Killik frontlines. Bits of dirt and melting snow were thrown into the air, flashes of light and deafening blasts bombarded the speederbike force. The thousands of speederbikes continued to roar forward defiantly, hitting triple-digit speeds as they whisked across the frozen ground.

Ignoring the explosions and death, Zekk kept his sights locked ahead, training the speeder's blaster onto the mass of insects before him. Friendly artillery wiped out the front groups, but the craters were promptly filled by more bugs. Zekk squeezed the trigger, his red lasers joining the others in a sheet of deadly energy that leveled several ranks of Killiks. Whole divisions of Killiks were mowed down by the incessant laser barrage from the fast-moving vehicles. The open nature of the valley meant that there was no cover and no way to avoid the speeding army of death. Adding to the chaos, the allied artillery continued to walk their fire backwards, decimating the rear of the Killik line at the same time.

Without a care for their fallen comrades, the tens of thousands within the bug army continued to advance into the blazing maelstrom. The Killiks returned fire with lasers and projectiles, but the valley made it hard for the Killiks to bring their superior numbers to bear. Even then, the weapons that were available were nothing to sneer at. Several speederbike pilots were picked off, their bodies flying off the bike or slumping over the controls. A rocket spiraled out from the Killik line and blew apart another bike. The one-sided barrage from the speeder-bike force was soon evened out as deadly beams of energy lanced out from both sides in a furious flurry of color and death.

Despite the resistance, the Killik line was rapidly being pushed back into the artillery bombardments and losing ground. The non-stop shrieking of the intense laser assault by the charging bikes was leveling anything in the GA forces' path, and the Killiks were rapidly losing the ability to bring enough guns to bear to make a sizable difference.

An enraged roar rose up from the Killik forces, and a wall of ten-meter tall Kolosolok beetles emerged through the clouds of smoke and dust. Artillery shells rained down on them, but their shiny black shells allowed them to shrug most of the damage off. These giant beetles charged out and met the speederbikes head on, causing the riders to cry out in alarm and terror. No amount of training would prepare one for battle against hundreds of armored, giant mandible-equipped, walking tanks. The speederbikes' laser cannon barely scorched the armored plating, and the hand-held missile-launchers only seemed to make them angry.

Giant beetle and speederbike force met in an ear-splitting crash that didn't bode well for the speederbikers. Like massive brooms, the tusks of the Kolosolok swept back and forth, raking entire speederbike squadrons at once. Those lucky enough to avoid the tusks then had to avoid the six mammoth legs holding the creatures up. The rest of the Killik army continued to fire, their lasers and missiles adding to the mounting death of the mounted GA force.

Despite the casualties, the speederbike force wasn't defenseless. Having learned from previous engagement just how to take on the mainstay tank of the Killik army, skilled riders kept their bikes under the mass of beetle and fired off special charges into the underside. The charges, equipped with drill-tips, bored into the less armored underbelly for a few seconds before shaped charges fired off liquid-metal cores directly into the walking behemoth. It took more than a handful of charges to bring one down, but the speederbikes were more than agile enough to zip from one Kolosolok to another.

After Zekk fired off a shaped charge into his current target, he angled his bike out from under the beast. Unfortunately, a Killik-fired missile barrage blasted his immediate vicinity. The other speederbikers with him were blown to bits in the blink of an eye, and he was thrown from his mount and landed in a painful roll on the icy ground. Coughing and groaning, Zekk took a moment to regain his bearings. The attacking force continued to have minimal success against the wall of Kolosolok, but the casualties they were taking were beginning to turn lopsided. On the bright side, they had inflicted far more damage than even their most optimistic analysts had said they would. The signal went up, and as planned, the speederbike force began their organized retreat.

A roar shook Zekk from his daze and he rolled away as a giant Killik solider jammed a pointed shaft into the ground he had just been lying in. Another large Killik warrior landed , and Zekk rolled in the other direction to avoid becoming a shish-ka-Jedi. He activated his lightsaber, saber slicing through the two staff weapons with ease. The two Killik

soldiers tried to stab him with the remnants, but he decapitated both in short order.
He had no time to celebrate his victory though, as the hundreds of Killiks in the Killik formation seemed to label him a threat and fire at him. Using the Force to enhance his speed, Zekk scrambled across the pockmarked and scorched battlefield, saber batting aside a few close calls. Without any real cover, the safest place for him, he mused, happened to be in the shadow of the giant beetles.
"Oh this is going to be good," Zekk groaned.
More giant Killik soldiers and their more common, person-sized counterparts began rushing into the void left behind by the speederbike force retreat. Zekk whirled and leaped, his saber slashing through countless bug-limbs and torsos on his way to cover. A lucky shot from a slug-thrower pitched him forward as the super-heated metal slug ripped through his side. He barely managed to bat away a more lethal round that had been on course to hit his head as he fell to the ground. Dazed, staring up at the stary sky, Zekk felt the ground vibrate from the multitude of footsteps all around. The pain from the wound was immense, and despite his Jedi training, he knew he wouldn't be able to escape the incoming horde of Killiks the way he was. And that angered him, angered him like he hadn't felt in a very long time.
Zekk closed his eyes, his breathing ragged as he deactivated his lightsaber. The battle continued to progress all around him, seemingly in slow motion, his ears ringing. He had just found his place in the galaxy, had found someone he loved and wanted to return to. There was no way he was going to let this isolated ball of icy rock become his tomb. No way he was going to let the galaxy once again take away someone important to Taryn Zel.
Focusing on the pain, the feel of his blood soaking his armored jumpsuit, his fury at the galaxy for daring him to die here and now, Zekk tapped into the part of himself he had kept locked away. Despite his strength slowly leaving him, he felt a darker power flow through his veins. He stood, his skin paler than usual as he gazed impassively at the battle unfolding all around him.
"*For the Kind*!" A human Joiner yelled, charging at Zekk with a vibrolance.
Zekk side-stepped the attack, grabbing the lance and pulling the Joiner to him. Reaching out with the Force, Zekk gripped onto the life-force of the Joiner and literally ripped it from the hapless drone. The surge of strength that suffused his body from the draining of the Joiner's

lifeforce allowed Zekk to staunch the bleeding of his wound. More Killiks abandoned their rush forward and pivoted in his direction. Zekk held out both hands, and the air crackled and snapped as a wave of purple lightning plowed into the charging bugs; frying and throwing them backwards at the same time. More Killiks began to diver their attention towards him.

Using the pain in his shoulder, and the anger that he had so carefully kept contained for so many years, Zekk swung an arm in their direction. The pressurized wave of Force energy lifted the bugs off their feet and plastered them to the nearest immobile surface. Two more laserbolts hit him, but he turned the damage and pain into power. There was a reason why he had been called the Darkest Knight at the age of sixteen. He was far from invincible, but with the dark side flowing through him, pain, the prospect of death, was irrelevant. He sprinted across the ground, his saber once again reactivating and cleaving through a whole rank of insectoid soldiers in his path.

He vaguely registered a squad of downed bikers making their last stand amidst a wall of Killik corpses, as well as the Kolosolok heading their direction. He jumped, pushing off the head of a large Killik soldier to propel him even higher. His saber deflected another volley of lasers shot in his direction, and then he grabbed onto a spike that emerged out from the Kolosolok's leg. He looked down, Killik soliders following him up the towering leg like ants on a tree. The Kolosolok was getting closer to its goal. Timing the movement of its leg, Zekk then leaped upwards, his saber digging into the carapace and acting as a handhold. The pain that flared from his wounded side was immense, and he couldn't help but yell in agony. But he quickly shunted the pain away and propelled himself onto the giant creature's back.

Now, his energy temporarily spent, he sat in a meditative pose, resting on the backs of his legs and stretching out with the Force. He searched the anatomy of the giant creature beneath him, tuning out everything else. He heard what he was looking for. The steady thump-thump, thump-thump, of the beetle's heart. He followed the bloodflow to the Kolosolok's brain. As he touched the life-giving organ with the Force, Zekk found mild irony in what he was about to do. He had spent most of the last two decades decrying the dark side, how there was always options.

Breathing out slowly, he opened his eyes and acted.

One moment the Kolosolok was part of the Kind, charging towards a small pocket of resistance to snuff it out. The next, it was turning in an artificial rage, trampling the scores of smaller Killiks beneath it. It let out a bellowing challenge, before its tusks gored the side of another

Kolosolok and dropped it in its tracks. The confusion and panic the unexpected betrayal had on the swarm was clear in the way the Killiks scattered all around them, as if trying to avoid some giant invisible boot from space.
Zekk pulled the Kolosolok up to the squad of bikers, had it kneel, and then called out. "Get on!"
The bikers didn't need to be told twice, scrambling up the side of the beetle's legs, and then helped up onto its torso by a brief Force lift.
"General Zekk!" One of them exclaimed, gaping at the gaping hole in his side and the multitude of laser burns covering his back and front. "You're hurt!"
Zekk used the Force again, and the Kolosolok got back to its feet and began a fast trot. His face pale from both the loss of blood and his use of the dark side, he smiled grimly. "It's just a flesh wound, Corporal."
A Killik artillery shell exploded off to their side.
"Keep on clearing our six," Zekk ordered. "This thing doesn't exactly have aft laser cannons."
The squad, relieved at the rescue, quickly hunkered down and resumed firing on the force pursuing them.
"The plan's working, sir," another of the bikers called back. "The Killiks have abandoned their staging point and are in full pursuit. Though we might have dealt them more damage than we wanted.'
"It's probably why they're so peeved," another said. "Heads up, we have several giant centipede things trying to cut us off."
Zekk tilted his head fractionally in acknowledgement. It was a full-fledged battle to control the beast beneath them as it was, much less make it attack members of the Kind. It helped that he had been a Joiner in the past, no matter how brief, but even then he was rapidly draining what strength the dark side was giving him trying to save himself and the squad. A thought struck him then. He could easily escape now, just on his own, and not expend any more strength. The others had done their part, he had no use for them any more.
As quick as that thought came, Zekk shoved it back from the dark place it had come, clenching his teeth as he did. As if sensing his doubt, the beast beneath them tried to once again break free from the hold Zekk had on it. It helped that it had the entire hive-mind to aid it in its struggles. That struggle, coupled with his attempts to control the dark energies at his disposal, meant he was in no position to avoid the giant centipedes.
Fortunately he had a girlfriend who was technically royalty and had control of several hover-tank divisions who were using another series of caves as cover. Said girlfriend, when she realized he hadn't been

among the bikers to make it out, had immediately begun scanning the battlefield from afar. Now, she was relaying coordinates to the artillery and tank divisions at her side.
The centipedes were built for speed and not heavily armored, so the armor-piercing shells that hit them really had them go splat against the Ilum surface in a particularly violent fashion. The Killiks who had been closest to catching up to the commandeered Kolosolok were the next victims, exploding shells tossing bug parts all over the place. Zekk refocused his attention on getting out of the area as his Hapan warrior princess rained fire from the sky all around him on anything that dared to threaten their escape.
Once they were far enough away, and he could begin to feel the corrupting affects of the dark side bunker they were trying to lead the bugs to, Zekk concentrated on the Kolosolok's heart. He briefly looked over his shoulder at the others. "Dismount, we go the rest of the way on foot."
The survivors did as told. With a gesture, Zekk stopped their mount's heart and slid off the body as it came crashing down.
When his feet hit the ground, it was then that his dark side-enhanced adrenaline-rush wore off and he became painfully aware of how taxed his body had been. He staggered, leaning heavily against the downed beetle as his world spun for a second.
"Sir?" One of the surviving bikers asked.
"I'm fine," Zekk breathed, a cloud of vapor accompanying his response. "Just need to catch my breath."
"We might not have to walk after all, friendly speeders en route."
"Good," Zekk laughed in relief, before a coughing fit cut him off. Splotches of blood dribbled on the ground before him and he grimaced. "Don't think I would have made it that far anyways."
"The Killiks are still coming."
"Then they've picked up on the dark side residuals of the bunker," Zekk nodded, taking another deep breath. For his part he began to once again close off the darker part of him, not wanting to take any chances now that he was in the dark side bunker's area of influence. "Now we herd them there somehow and blow them to bits. Simple."
-)[-VI-](-
Four days later, Zekk very slowly opened his eyes as he emerged from his healing trance, the smell of disinfectant, bacta, and other medical supplies prominent in the underground cave that was his quarters. Having left the bacta tanks for the more seriously injured, and less Force-able soldiers, he had chosen to heal the old-fashion way. Even then, he still couldn't forget the ashen look on Taryn's face when she

had seen the extent of his injuries in the med-ward of their base. Despite being a soldier, knowing the risks, and seeing much worse on Zadaria, her reaction to his blaster bolt-riddled, hole-in-the-side blade-embedded-in-his-thigh state, had made him wonder if he had looked much worse than he actually was.
He remembered entering the trance in his quarters with a resolute but silent Taryn staring at his vital monitors. His trance had his vitals slow considerably and she had glared at the monitors as he did, daring them to drop below whatever numbers his fierce warrior-protector had in her head. And now, as he emerged from the trance, she was still in his quarters, only fast asleep on his cot, clutching one of his Jedi robes to herself and once again looking very much like a little girl.
He gingerly got to his feet, his wounded thigh knitted but not quite ready for another run for his life. He then moved over to the cot and gently ran a hand through Taryn's hair. The action woke her, eyelids fluttering up as she looked at him with vulnerable gray eyes.
"Hey," Zekk said, giving her a soft kiss.
"Hi," Taryn reached for his bandaged side and rested a hand on it. "You okay?"
"I'll need to do some strength training to rebuild the muscle tone, but I should be fine," Zekk said reassuringly.
Taryn angled herself out of his cot and stood so that she was toe to toe with him. Head bowed, she rested her cheek against his opposite shoulder, her hands taking one of his. "Thanks for fighting so hard to come back to me."
"Never have to thank me for that," Zekk said, rubbing her back and burying his face into her hair. "I like being alive too, you know."
Taryn just smiled against his chest, and squeezed his hand again, sobering quickly. "I know using all that dark side couldn't have been easy. Especially when you promised yourself you wouldn't."
"How much did you see?"
"I saw you do a Jacen Solo on those bugs, roasted them to a crisp."
"They wanted to kill me," Zekk shrugged, wondering why he didn't feel worse about it. "I figured you'd be really unhappy if I let them."
"Got that right," Taryn exhaled shakily. She gave him a short hug full of emotion, and then stepped away. "If you're ready to re-enter the fight, then I am too."
Zekk gave her a reassuring smile. "What's been happening while I've been mending?"
"According to Trista, the bugs in our sector have stopped a couple dozen kilometers away from the target bunker. We've been trying to entice them to go further, but no luck yet."

"What about the other sectors?" Zekk reached for a Jedi robe, and Taryn gently helped him get it over his healing shoulder.
"Jedi Knight Horn reports heavy clashes with the Killiks in her sector. She's trying to bleed them for every kilometer she yields. Jedi Knight Hellin reports success similar to ours, the baiting force worked but the bugs stopped short of our target. Jedi Knight Ti had the bad news. Her baiting force was wiped out when the ground they were on gave way. Her bugs are still spread out over several kilometers and she is attempting to formulate a new plan."
"Can't have everything go our way," Zekk shrugged, stretching to work the kinks out of his joints. "Casualties from our side?"
"Minimal," Taryn answered distractedly, a hand ghosting over his bare torso to where blaster burns had once been. Now, there were only splotches of pink skin that would match their surroundings in time. "Could have been a lot worse."
Zekk gently took her hand and held it to his cheek "That's good to hear. I'm glad you made it out too."
Taryn nodded, freeing her hand and cinching his robes closed. "Of course, I'm a Hapan Commando and of the Royal House of Zel. It's expected."
Zekk handed her her black leather jacket, which she slung over a shoulder. "And I'm a Jedi Knight, on loan to House Zel. I'm not that easy to kill either, so stop worrying."
"I'm not worrying," Taryn stuck her tongue out at him. "Would you rather I be like some of those princesses in the holovids that swoon all over their valiant protector who returns gravely wounded from defending her honor?"
"I think I'd be a little scared if you started doing that. You don't seem to be the swooning type."
"I know. Can you imagine the scores of girls who grow up watching that trash?" Taryn snorted. "Why does the rest of the galaxy think that a princess needs someone to defend her honor if she can be perfectly capable of defending it herself?"
"Makes for a romantic story?" Zekk offered.
"If they want to make a romantic story they should have the knight and princess fighting side-by-side against certain death, and then emerging from the hell and kissing passionately as explosions flare in the background."
"That definitely sounds like something more your taste," Zekk laughed. "I noticed when we were at your home back on Hapes there were a bunch of holovids I didn't recognize."

"Local Hapan movie market. When we get back we'll watch a few together," Taryn said cheerfully.
The doors to the command center slid open. Those there straightened and saluted.
"General."
"Lady Zel."
"General, good to see you're up."
"Jedi Knight Zekk," Natua Wan acknowledged.
"Jedi Knight Wan," Zekk tilted his head. "Any news on the front?"
"The Killiks have landed close to a hundred thousand more soldiers in our sector since you've been out, effectively replacing the losses we inflicted earlier. Their ships in orbit continue to make maneuvering on the surface challenging, but we know that the Queen Mother's fleet remains hidden."
"Do we know why the Killiks haven't advanced towards the bunker?"
"A few theories," an Imperial colonel spoke. "They could be waiting to integrate their reinforcements. Waiting for a queen Killik. Or sense a trap."
"It could also be that they are slowly feeding off the dark side nexus from a safer distance," Natua voiced. "We are unaware of the full extent the Force affects the Killik hive-mind, but if prolonged exposure to an individual will drive one insane, it is possible that the negative repercussions on the hive-mind are greater."
"What are we doing about it now?'
"Lady Trista Zel is leading a team of fighters to bait the Killiks," a Hapan advisor said. "She claimed that she knew how the Killiks thought better than most so took a portion of Alpha squad and members from other units to harass the Killik formation. She's maintaining comm-silence so we're not sure where she is at the moment. She has, however, succeeded in drawing the Killik army in our sector ten kilometers closer. They're still twenty kilometers from the kill-zone, however."
"For the most part, as per the plan, we've kept our forces underground," the G.A.G Captain Salle Serpa said. "The Killiks have air superiority so there is too much risk moving large amounts of our troops on the surface."
"We have to keep the Killiks interested in our forces though, and as skilled as Trista is, she won't be able to maintain their attention indefinitely," Zekk said evenly.
"Our command bunker is in the completely opposite direction of the kill zone. We can hold out indefinitely here. If the Killiks don't want to move, why should we worry?" Another officer asked.

"They're close enough to feel the effects of the dark side," Zekk said. "They can slowly leech the energy from where they are instead of gorging themselves on it. We wait too long and they can use that Force energy to find us."
"We all knew that we'd have to lose people to get this job done," Taryn spoke up. "What we have to do is become such a threat to the Killiks on the ground that they'll have no choice but to chase us closer to the kill zone."
"We can hide out here, yes. But it *will* come back to bite us in the end once all the Killiks are empowered by the dark side," Zekk elaborated. "We'll keep our forces in small numbers to minimize the chances of getting caught in an orbital bombardment."
"Okay then," the Imperial representative clasped his hand together. "Let's get to work. Remember, just because we lead the Killiks to the kill zone doesn't mean our job is over. There will still be thousands of Killiks left, hopping mad and wanting to kill us."
"Just what we signed up for," Taryn grinned along with some of the others. "Bring them on."
-)[-Chapter End-](-

Unknown Regions
-)[-I-](-
Shadow-bombs ready. Jagged heard the message cross his mind like a breeze, but didn't direct his eyes away from the Killik carrier and escort before him. His fighter was hiding behind a particularly dense cloud of space dust, one of dozens of others waiting for their chance to strike. In the meantime, the close to two-dozen Jedi Anakin Solo had left him were lining up their silent and deadly payloads.
Stealing another page from the Yuuzhan Vong War playbook, the Jedi were literally pushing a very large yield of explosives towards a part of the Killik fleet that was scouring the Utegetu Nebula in search of their nemesis. The Killiks learned quickly, with no one tactic working twice, no feint working a second time. They had the equivalent of a super-computer for a brain, with many minds capable of analyzing and neutralizing a tactic seconds after it was deployed. Rather than waiting to be attacked now, the Killiks were actively hunting for both Jagged and Wedge's fleets—the hive mind allowing them to triangulate locations should any one Killik group come under attack.
One thing the Killiks hadn't been able to adapt to, however, was the shadow-bomb technique. It was hard, after all, to see an inert torpedo barely a meter long with sensors or eyesight in the vast void of space. Another tactic the Killiks hadn't managed to overcome was the Force-

meld that the Jedi managed. Though comm-messages of any kind were easily detected by the Killiks' sensitive antennae, the Force had no such risk.

Jagged closed his eyes, exhaling and thinking his orders as loud as he could. His Imperial Jedi wingman, Antalia Draco, picked up on his thoughts and relayed it to the rest of the meld, which in turn relayed it to the other pilots. All of this took but a second, with ideas traveling at the speed of thought. So long as he kept his orders simple, the transmission was near instantaneous.

Like a wolf-pack, squadrons of Starhunters and Stealth-X's cruised through the dense dust cloud, relying on their eyes as opposed to their fighter's sensors. They reached the very edge of the cloud, waited for the Killik fleet to near point-blank range, and fired their missiles into the passing ships.

The Killiks reacted instantly even as ships broke apart. Killik missiles and laser batteries raked the dust clouds in a flurry of flashing light. The X-wings and TIEs dove or climbed, splitting up and forcing the Killiks to fire in many different directions. Dartfighters and Killik-made starfighters deployed from their carriers and took off in pursuit. Wave after wave of fighters were launched, several squadrons for every Starhunter and Stealth-X.

Jagged closed his eyes once more and relayed the next command. Syal Antilles and squadrons of Eta-5s and TIE Defenders broke formation and fell behind the Killik fighter craft. The fighter-interceptor group obliterated the Killik fighters with impunity, lasers firing and burning targets as fast as the pilots could line up the shot.

The Killik capital and support ships finished their full reverse and lumbered around to aid their fighters. Their lasers and missiles continued to fly, but the Jedi squadrons were on their game. Those who weren't maintaining the meld or pushing the shadow-bombs were using their inhuman reflexes to shoot down the missiles and torpedoes moments after they were launched.

And when the Killik capital ships entered the fray, Jagged sent another command through his wingman.

Instantly, the shadow bombs drifted towards capital-ship engine bays and detonated. One second the Killik warmachine was steam-rolling through the few fighters unfortunate enough to be cut-off from the main group, the next, nearly the entire fleet-group was dead in space. The moment that happened, the Stealth-Xs and Starhunters looped back around and unleashed punishing laser and missile barrages on the immobilized capital ships. They were targeting weapons nodules,

torpedo tubes, any type of offensive weaponry that the flotilla of ships had.
Jagged similarly gunned the engines of his Clawcraft, leading a formation of three bomber squadrons. The B-wings, Scimitar TIE bombers, and even K-wings cut through the dust cloud, their targets already lined up thanks to the Force-coordination of the Jedi. Another thought sent, and the mass of bombers unleashed a stream of missiles into the immobilized and defanged Killik fleet. Despite the Killik's superior numbers, they had been completely caught off guard.
One after another, the warheads slammed into the heavy Shard and spitcrete cruisers, blowing them apart with frightening ease. Pieces of capital ship spun off in all direction. The smaller corvette and picket-ships employed by the Killiks tried to mount a counter-attack, but were sandwiched between the bombers and the Starhunters and Stealth-X's. The dartfighters and Killik-made starfighters were likewise falling as TIE Defenders and Eta-Fives darted and spun through the thick nebula's clouds.
Jagged let out a breath of relief. A month and a half of winnowing the Killik's fighter capabilities was finally bearing fruit. The Killiks just didn't have the sheer number of fighter-craft that they had had previously, and it was leaving their heavier capital ships vulnerable.
Then his sensor system screamed out a warning. A second Killik fleet-group had just arrived. From the speed at which it had done so, it had either been shadowing the first fleet and ready to spring a trap, or had been patrolling a nearby part of the nebula as part of the random, odd grid-like pattern the Killiks were employing.
Either way, that spelled trouble.
And then it got worse. The red light on his console let him know that an interdictor field had just been activated.
"This is Moff Fel to support group, jump in now, neutralize the interdictor," Jagged said over the comm. He sent his Clawcraft into a fast climb as a fresh wave of dartfighters streamed out of the new battle group.
In a flash, the *Eternal Dynast* and three other Chiss Star Destroyers arrived, deploying the rest of the fighters at his command. The odds, eight Killik capital ships for every one he had, were still not good.
"Flight Officer, stay on my wing. I will be displeased if you get yourself shot down."
"*Yes, sir*." Antalia replied with the same emotionless tone he was using.
As he anticipated, his use of the comm-system had attracted the attention of nearby Killik ships. The Killik reasoning was simple: to communicate meant to give orders, to give orders the person had to

be of sufficient rank, therefore target any ship that was communicating to kill ranking personnel.
"What's the status on the interdictor?" Jagged asked, his Clawcraft's lasers scorching a trio of dartfighters. A quartet of green lasers from his side took down another three as his wingman matched him maneuver for maneuver. It probably helped that she knew what he'd be doing before he even performed the action. Even then, Jagged had to admit that the teenage Imperial Jedi's flying skills were impressive.
"*Interdictor heavily defended. Taking heavy damage*."
Jagged glanced around the battlefield and saw that the Killiks were slowly turning the tide. Making a snap decision he keyed the comm again. "Divert personnel from the *Firestorm* to the *Eternal Dynast*. It's taken on more damage than we can afford to repair. Set the *Firestorm* on a collision course with the interdictor and automate its weapon systems."
"*Carrying out your orders, Moff Fel*."
In the meantime, Jagged found himself flying alongside his cousin as her Eta-Five led a half-squadron of fighters into the thickest part of the dogfight. Lasers flashed, metal pinged, and explosions lit up the nebula at every conceivable location. There was so much laser fire that it was almost the luck of the draw to fly into a space not inhabited by death-creating energy.
Jagged's Clawcraft shook, a Killik missile sheering off one of the wings. Another explosion close by and a light flickered off his squadron readiness board. "Flight Officer?"
"*Transponder took a hit, still with you sir*."
Jagged swallowed his emotions. "See that you stay that way. We're going to help the *Firestorm* in its task."
"*Roger, sir*."
Jagged made a mental note to make sure the Imperial Jedi developed some personality. Only *he* was allowed to be the Chiss-like automaton after all. "Flight Officer, the normal reaction when being ordered on a suicide run is not that."
"*Jedi Solo never informed me what the proper reaction should be. She said that suicide missions were something of a norm for Jedi."*
Jagged couldn't help but smile, partly from her words, but also from the fact that the *Eternal Dynast* had just blasted apart three larger Killik capital ships all on her lonesome. "And did she say what normal missions were for Jedi?"
"*Boring*."
"Very well then, carry on." Jagged's fighter swerved under the burning remains of a Killik cruiser, then straight down the cored-out remains of

another. Matching his movements were Syal's half-squadron, and another half-squadron led by Jedi Death Knight Toile Senn.
They emerged out the other side, the newer Killik fleet pounding away at Jagged's reinforcements. The Killik interdictor was smack dab in the center of the fleet, protected by seven other ships. The fighters blazed forward, juking around the flurry of offensive fire the cruisers and protective ships began laying out. Two fighters weren't able to keep up and were shredded in the blink of an eye. The rest, however, managed to close the distance. Once under the envelope, they were able to strike at the protecting ships with greater ease.
"Target weapons' nodes and engines." Jagged followed his words by firing at a quad-turbolaser cannon mounted on a half-Star Destroyer half-Mon Cal hybrid. The turret exploded, pelting the ship with shrapnel. He continued along the side of the ship, strafing everything his targeting reticule lit up.
"*Enemy fighters inbound*," Antalia reported. "*Three, mark, two-ten*."
"*My flight's got it*," Syal called back. Her flight of an assortment of fighters peeled up and began a daring dance in the range of the turbolasers. They would bait the incoming dartfighters and then draw them into the turbolaser fire of the capital ships, which seemed more intent on blasting the GA fighters than worrying about the wellbeing of those in the dartfighters.
Jagged and the others with him continued their decimation of the weapon systems of the ships before them. One friendly fighter was winged by a short-range turret and sent crashing into the side of a spitcrete cruiser. But in short order, Jagged had created a narrow corridor for the flaming Chiss Star Destroyer to pilot through.
Pulling clear of his latest target, Jagged watched as the interdictor cruiser's own weapons opened up on the approaching cruiser. Lasers repeatedly lashed the once pristine white haul, tearing up hull-plating and blasting great gouges into the Chiss vessel. But the *Firestorm* surged forward, its prow slamming into the Killik cruiser with great momentum.
Jagged tore his attention away to aid his cousin's flight in fending off the swarm of dartfighters. Syal and the others with her, out of warheads, had resorted to out-maneuvering the plethora of fighters, causing them to slam into the hulls of their motherships or each other with a series of breakneck turns and dives.
He fired off another series of lasers, stitching the column of fighters trailing the Eta-Five, and then saw that the red light on his console had turned off.
"Interdiction field is down, all crafts jump to lightspeed."

In the blink of an eye, the GA force beat feet, jumping whenever and wherever they could.

-)[-II-](-

Jaina pushed her Chase-X to its limits as the Killiks swarmed all around like the spinning mouth of a cyclone. Fighters behind her were being shredded by the second, as the GA forces did their best to resist the Killik advance on the fifth planet from the sun. Geroon itself was only two more planets away, but the allied leaders had agreed that getting said planet in range of the Killik's Pulsar Station Mark II was probably not a good idea.

Even then, they could scarcely come up with a better plan.

"Any time now, War Master!" Jaina yelled, her canopy developing spidery cracks as shrapnel from nearby explosions pinged her fighter. A fighter directly behind her disappeared into a ball of flame, and another on her wing disintegrated from the incessant laser fire strafing their group.

The *Megador* leaped into battle then and there, the Super Star Destroyer dwarfing any of the other ships on the battlefield. At once, its many dozens of turbolaser batteries opened fire, containing more firepower than some fleets. The tunnel of dartfighters pursuing Jaina and the others was shredded in a heartbeat, chain-reactions annihilating whole squads of dartfighters and freeing up the GA fighters.

The ships from Loiric's fleet jumped in as well, the Yuuzhan Vong vessels acting as the hammer to the *Megador's* anvil. Plasma-fire, once feared by the Galactic Alliance forces, was now being used on their enemies to great effect. The nearly hundred Killik capital ships put up a fierce fight, their weapons piercing the shields of the *Megador* at several locations and causing some chaos on the massive ship's hull. But it wasn't enough. Battered by the Super Star Destroyer's weapons on one end, and Yuuzhan Vong bloodthirst on the other, the Killik fleet was rapidly succumbing to the pincer attack.

"Pulsar Station coming in range, Killik reinforcements will be in firing range T-minus ten minutes."

"Get the *Megador* out of here," Jaina ordered, squeezing the trigger and vaping a Joiner-piloted TIE Advanced . "It's done its part."

The Super Star Destroyer fired off one last devastating barrage to ravage the Killik fleet, then performed a micro-jump further into the system. The Yuuzhan Vong forces kept up their assault, mingling with the flaming Killik fleet to minimize the likelihood that they'd be hit.

Jaina, however, had a familiar sinking feeling in her stomach as the Force let her know she was in grave danger. "All GA forces, pull back. This is a direct order, fall back to the next planet!"
"*For the Glory of Yuuzhan'tar!*" Screamed a fanatical Yuuzhan Vong warrior in turn. An arm of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet continued their assault, tearing into the Killik vessels with the same fury that had once terrified countless systems.
"Loiric, get your people out of here!"
"*I have withdrawn, but I will not deny them a chance to glorify themselves in the eyes of the Yun'o.*"
"Yeah, and my sister-in-law says that the Yun'o doesn't accept idiots, so unless you want them all to be serving Yun'Rhysode for the rest of eternity, call them off!"
Jaina kept her engines red-line, trying to put as much distance between herself and the planet's gravity shadow as fast as she could. In her rear scopes, she could see that only a part of the Yuuzhan Vong forces had obeyed her command to retreat.
"Blasted nerfherders!" Jaina swore, punching her hyperdrive the moment she was clear.
She had no sooner reverted from her micro-jump than the sensors on her fighter lit up in a series of flashing warning lights. The Pulsar Station had fired once again. Fired even though the Killiks still had a several dozen vessels—capital to fighter—in the kill-zone. The resulting mini-nova and exploding planet blew apart everything within several hundred kilometers of the blast radius. The Yuuzhan Vong fleet, the Killik fleet, the planet and the moons, were all reduced to space-dust in the blink of an eye.
"Okay, now!" Jaina yelled again, her fighter jumping back into the battlefield she had just left. With her were elements of both Ariarsh's and Irolia's fleet groups, all spread out to avoid fracticide. After nearly two months of battling for the system, the analysts had finally found a weakness to the Pulsar Station. Even though it could destroy a planet, it needed time to recharge after simultaneously firing more than one superlaser. Based on some complicated mathematical equations that made Jaina's eyes crossed, the science-division all concurred that they had at least another hour or two before any of the superlasers could be fired again.
"Red group, Gold group, all fighters on me," Jaina announced. "Irolia, make me some holes in that thing."
The Chiss-Imperial-Vagaari taskforce surged ahead, lasers flaring as it tried to clear out the Killik vessels escorting the Pulsar Station.

The station itself wasn't completely defenseless. It bristled with hundreds of turbolaser batteries, all of which opened fired at the incoming fleet.
"Okay flyboys and girls, we're going in full throttle," Jaina ordered. "Set your deflectors to double-front. We'll let the Supreme Commander's fleet cover our sixes."
"*Make it quick, Solo. We won't last long against that Pulsar Station* ***and*** *the Killik fleet*." Irolia called out.
"Just got to make a Star Destroyer-sized hole is all," Jaina said, her gaze locked onto the sphere in front of her. "All fighters, target the following coordinates and turn firing controls over to your astromechs for simultaneous launch when ready."
The Pulsar Station's gunners did their best to take out the multitude of crafts screaming towards it, but the fighters were so small that they avoided the turbolasers with ease. Even with the dozens of missiles it flung at the enemy ships, the Pulsar Station couldn't take all of them out.
"Mark, fire!" Jaina announced.
A stream of lasers and torpedoes were let loose, all targeting a singular location on the much larger Pulsar Station. The station's pinpoint-laser defenses went into overdrive. But then Irolia's fleet group, ignoring the enemy fleet pounding on it, added their own capital-ship based weaponry to the barrage. Even heavily shielded, the weapons of hundreds of vessels hitting one location with pinpoint accuracy, overloaded the localized generators. A plume of fire rose out from the station as it vented atmosphere, a massive hole ripped into its side.
"Admiral Reige, go!"
In a feat made possible only by Chiss Jedi Antaria Wellos, Imperial Jedi Rahm Marek, and Jedi Death Knight Maika combining their concentration and abilities to helm of one of Vitor Reige's ships, the Jedi jumped an Imperial Mark II Star Destroyer directly into the new gaping hole in the Pulsar Station. The station's shield generators recovered a moment later, but the ship was already lodged in the chasm. Its own turbolaser batteries and missile tubes fired off with everything it had. Emerging out from the belly of the Star Destroyer, the three Force-sensitives piloted their fighters away from the station as fast as they could.
The Star Destroyer, about a tenth of the size of the station it had rammed, continued to fire for several long seconds, its main reactors building up to an overload.
In the meantime, Jaina and the others were fighting for their lives as they engaged the much larger Killik fleet all around the Pulsar Station.

Jaina lost count of the number of enemy fighters she had vaped, knowing only that her fighter's guns were getting quite the work-out. All around, the GA fleet she commanded continued to do their best to survive, to take out as many enemy as they could.
She felt it in the Force, and briefly angled her fighter so she could watch the detonation first hand. A Star Destroyer—packed with the Rancor's share of ordnance they had available—glowed a bright white as its main reactor went critical. A second later, a massive explosion ripped a full third of the Pulsar Station apart, the shockwave buckling another third and turning its insides into a massive electronical mess.
"This is Goddess Lead," Jaina announced. "Finish it and fall back."
Ariarsh and Irolia's fleet moved in for the kill, their massive laser batteries blasting the heavily damaged remnants of the Pulsar Station with extreme prejudice. The rest of the Killik forces scattered, micro-leaping back to the previous planet as fast as they could. Another minute later, and the Pulsar Station exploded once more, its own reactor pierced by the barrage. The sphere vanished in a ball of white light, blowing completely apart this time and ending its threat once and for all.
Jaina laughed along with the others, listening to the cheers of victory rising up on all channels. But even as she did, she knew that the battle for the system was far from over. They had lost a good portion of their forces on the two-part attack. Admiral Reige barely had a dozen capital ships left, Irolia's fleet had likewise been decimated trying to open up the hole in the Pulsar Station. Ariarsh' group was more a light-attack element, and Loiric's Yuuzhan Vong led forces were unpredictable and numbered in the dozens. The Killiks still had much more.
"Congratulations all. Shuttles, pick up any EV pilots and fall back to Geroon, we've done what we set out to do. Now it's the bugs' move."
-)[-III-](-
Zekk stood on top of the frosted summit, icy cold winds whipping around him as he stared down at the massive Killik army below. Two months of poking and prodding had gotten the enemy forces to within a few kilometers of the kill-zone. The main problem was that the bugs weren't moving a centimeter further. The dark side corruption emanating from the old bunkers had seeped into the surrounding lands, meaning that the bugs didn't even have to go into the bunker to feast on its powers. Instead they passed the time harvesting the planet's natural resources, digging up and ingesting the crystals Ilum was famous for and adding it to their carapace-like armor. This was a very big problem.
Which is why the solution had to be drastic in nature.

The bugs controlled the ground, the skies, the orbit, and pretty much everywhere on the planet save for a few isolated patches the Force-meld was deliberately keeping 'uninteresting' to the bugs.
As the cold wind frosted his cheeks and formed translucent crystals on his eyebrows and exposed strands of unruly black hair, Zekk closed his eyes.
"*Are you sure about this?" Taryn whispered softly, reaching out to squeeze Zekk's hand tightly. Her forehead was pressed against his bare chest as she kept her breathing as even as she could. She hadn't even so much as twitched when he had initially laid out his plan during the briefing. But now that it was just the two of them in his quarters, the emotions she didn't dare show to anyone else were plain to see on her earnest face.*
"*No other Jedi on this planet has been Joined," Zekk murmured, a hand reaching up to cup her face, thumb stroking her cheek. "According to Tekli, my brain's still set for broadcast and receiving. Until I actually use the Yuuzhan Vong methods to re-shape it, it'll stay that way for the rest of my life."*
"*I know," Taryn breathed shakily. "I know…it's just…Zekk…you know how much you mean to me and Trista right?"*
"*I love you," Zekk murmured, tilting her head back so he could look into her piercing gray eyes.*
"*I know," Taryn said again, pulling his head down for a soft, feathery kiss. They parted, and she took a step back, her gray eyes roaming his body as if committing every centimeter to memory. "You wouldn't be House Zel's personal Jedi if you weren't so stupidly self-sacrificing."*
"*True," Zekk murmured, squeezing her hand. He had to admit, he was just as terrified of the plan as Taryn was. Only, as Jedi, it wasn't like he could pass the torch onto someone else. "We'll survive this, Taryn. I promise."*
"*There you go with your ridiculous promises again," Taryn said with a soft laugh, a single tear welling in her eyes. She pressed two fingers to her lips and then pressed her fingers against Zekk's lips. "Come back to House Zel, Jedi Knight Zekk. We haven't released you from our services just yet."*
"*Yes, Lady Zel. I promise."*
Zekk opened his green eyes, his emotions running freely through his veins. Fear, anger, hate, mixed with compassion, empathy, understanding, creating a counter-balance that was neither Jedi nor Sith in nature. He couldn't see how anyone could be stoically calm in face of the plan he was about to put into motion. Considering it was yet again another one of his plans, Zekk made a mental note to see if

all those melds for the Greatest-Mind-Trick-in-History was causing more than a few Solo-style thoughts to corrupt his normally life-preserving thought processes.
He reached into his fluttering robes and pulled out a single syringe. In it was a specialized cocktail of chemicals developed by Yuuzhan Vong shapers to 're-Join' him to the Kind. Since the Killiks relied on both chemical and electrical bonds to maintain contact, all he had to do to reinsert himself into that great hive mind was 'switch on' the parts of his brain ready to receive commands. Several problems though. It had never been tested before, even the Shapers were unsure what the effects would be. It would in essence be opening his brain up to the entire Killik hive mind, something that was not very appealing in any situation. And there was no telling what damage would be done to his mind from both the drug and Killik perspective. But there was next to zero other options that would preserve the lives of those trying to survive on Ilum.
He let out another breath, the frost forming on his chilled flesh almost immediately.
There was another reason why he needed a better plan. He was standing at ground-zero, the very top of the mountain the bunker was hidden in. The very bunker filled with enough explosives to turn the area he was into a very wide crater.
Zekk let an object float from his utility belt to his other hand, a small holo-projector. He activated it, and Taryn and Trista's images appeared. Taken on Ilum during one of its rare and spectacular sunsets, ice crystals bedecked the twins' red strands of hair. Taryn was playfully leaning over her otherwise stoic sister, a smirk on her face as they both gazed directly at the photographer. Zekk could feel his heart pound as he focused on the two, his hands shaking as a mental message let him know all the other units were in position.
Releasing one last breath, and before he could second guess himself, Zekk pocketed the holo-emitter and jabbed the syringe into his neck. Aside from the sharp pain, Zekk felt the flood of chemicals enter his blood-stream. At the same time, he opened himself fully to the Force, the light and the dark, letting its dual nature send the surrounding snow flurries into a cyclone of frigid air.
Immediately his mind was bombarded by thoughts that were not his own, experiences that he could never have felt or seen. Stars dying, being born, the galaxy spinning from such a far distance away, looking impossibly small for something that held trillions upon trillions of life forms. The stars seemed to spin above him, the mountain flattening

beneath his feet. The cold amplified by the nervous systems of millions of Killik drones and Joiners.

Welcome back! A joyous cry echoed, as if shouted from a far distance. Zekk couldn't help but smile, a teardrop freezing as it left his cheek. It was like returning to the arms of family and friends long gone. His burdens, his fears, his responsibility no longer just his to bear but now the burdens and fears of the entire Kind. He no longer felt the frigid chill of the Ilum atmosphere, no longer was worried about whether his plan would work.

The dark side miasma coming from the bunker stopped spreading outwards, and instead began climbing upwards. The Force continued to pulsate from Zekk, light and dark like a lighthouse beacon beckoning travelers from far distances. His will resonated through the Joiner bond, even as the person who was Zekk began to slowly and seamlessly melt into the wall of personalities that made up the Kind.

Hapan general no longer, such a title was now meaningless, pointless, compared to the responsibility the Kind had. Generals, presidents, beggars, serfs, all was equal in the Kind, all worked to further the Kind's goals, to preserve the galaxy in the way the Builders of long ago would have wanted it preserved.

He was no longer Zekk, Jedi Knight. Light and dark, right and wrong, they still mattered, but he was now serving something much greater than a singular order that could attend to only a few planets at a time. As part of the Kind, he could now serve billions with but a thought. The drones were his, their wills his own. He had but to command them and they would raze whole planets to bring peace. Had but to order them and they would save a dying star system with feats of architecture few living could ever hope to match.

No longer the lover of Taryn Zel, Princess of Hapes. What was one person's feelings, one person's desires, compared to the desires and needs of a galaxy? How could he, AebeaZekk selfishly devote time to this one being when he could be using that time to do so much good all over the galaxy?

What was the will of one individual against the strength of billions?

The Kind welcomed him back into the fold without hesitation, without judgment. He was of the Kind now, a friend, a part of them. Their will pressed into his mind, preparing to wipe away all doubt, all desire to resist the peace he had rediscovered.

And then the second half of the Yuuzhan Vong tailored cocktail kicked in, and all at once, Zekk's mind was clear.

Clear, yet still hooked up to the Kind. He could send commands, but not receive them.

Finding himself on all fours panting for air, Zekk closed his black-irised eyes and issued a simple command. *Come to me*.
The Kind, having never experienced such a 'half-Joined' individual immediately assumed that their long loss member had come under attack from the Galactic Alliance. After all, the Galactic Alliance had reclaimed him twice before and would no doubt try again. Just as the GA had done for the countless other Jedi, generals, and leaders that the Kind had absorbed during their run of the galaxy.
Zekk continued to pant, sweat no longer freezing on his heated skin. He projected distress, pain, used the dark side that was wrapping around him to further deceive the millions of insects coming to his aid. The Joiner bond burned at his mind, rivulets of blood dripping from his nose and freezing on the purple mountain top. But still Zekk pressed on, using the Force to sustain himself even as it felt as if his mind was melting in his skull.
Come to me! Come to me! Come to me!
Below, a fierce chittering rang out, the once immobile mass surging forward. AebeaZekk was not just a Joiner, but a Jedi valued by so many other Joiners. Was not just a Jedi but a powerful Jedi known to TaatWelk, whose strength would greatly help the Kind. Scouts had already shown no hostiles in the area near the mountain, already searched the place for danger and found nothing. So the hundreds of thousands of Killiks in the area moved as one, with one purpose.
And it was not just the ground forces. Squadrons of dartfighters dropped out of their orbiting patterns and whisked by the mountainside. Several Shard cruisers entered the thin atmosphere of the planet, their guns searching for whatever was distressing AebeaZekk. All around the mountain the bugs gathered, clattering, chittering, roaring. Zekk rewarded their approach by channeling the dark side streams into those closest. As if he were offering sugar-water to ants, more swarmed in to feast on the power he was controlling.
Zekk began to laugh, even as swarms of razor and thud bugs swirled around him in miniature tornadoes and dartfighters orientated themselves towards him. Weakly gripping his comlink, Zekk exhaled once more.
"Burn Us all."
The explosion was almost instantaneous, a shockwave that turned the mountain and surrounding snowy ground into dust. That liquefied and obliterated all in its path. It traveled upwards and outwards, swatting the myriad of bugs from the sky and sending massive chunks of rock flying. The sound of the explosion traveled as far as oxygen would

allow, rumbling in a can't-miss-it boom that shook the ground for many many kilometers away.
As for Zekk, even as the mountain began to disintegrate beneath his very feet, he kicked upwards with every ounce of strength he had left. With precision timing made possible only by years of team-work and trust, a single starfighter darted through the panicked Killik forces without care for its own safety. Zekk's downward arc began and he landed cleanly in the back seat of the royal *Miy'til* fighter of the Queen Mother herself. The canopy closed the moment his rear touched the seat, and Tenel Ka gunned her fighter's engine. In and out, the fighter wove, dodging pieces of falling rock, Killik fighters, and the turbolasers being pumped out in a steady-stream by the Shard cruisers.
"When'd you get so good at piloting a snubfighter?" Zekk said with a delirious laugh.
"We were here for nearly eight months, most of it spent confined to Our ship. We got bored," Tenel Ka answered. "But I can now understand Jaina's appreciation of these flying death-traps a lot more."
"How'd you get your advisors agree to this mission?"
"I did? That is news to me," Tenel Ka responded monotonously. "Now please stop talking, several dozen fighters are targeting us and I am not as skilled a pilot as you or Jaina…yet."
Zekk, still slightly deranged from the absurdity of everything, just laughed. Blood continued to trickle out of his nose, and now his ears, his mind pounding like a Rancor was beating on it. "As plans go, this was definitely the stupidest one We've come up with."
As the fighter coasted across the surface of the planet, another titanic explosion was seen in the distance.
"It appears Jedi Knight Horn was successful too," Tenel Ka commented evenly. How she remained completely calm even when a vortex of lasers of projectiles were narrowing in on their location always caught Zekk off guard. The fact that this was not a one-time occurrence didn't bode well for either of their sanities. "And judging from the fact that I still feel her in the Force, Rajade must have successfully picked her up as well."
"Yay for her, yay for us," Zekk said wearily, closing his eyes in an attempt to stop the world from spinning. It didn't help that Tenel Ka was doing barrel-roll after barrel-roll to avoid the many things that wanted to kill them.
"Taryn will be pleased that you survived as well."
At that, Zekk opened his eyes, frowning once more. There was something in Tenel Ka's voice that told him he was missing something.
"Who?"

"My cousin," unable to turn in her seat to look at him, Tenel Ka immediately reached out through the Myrkr bond, dangerously dividing her attention so she could check on one of her oldest friends. The cockpit shell took a few spidery cracks for her distraction. "Taryn Zel, of the Royal House of Zel."
Zekk grimaced as another wave of nausea passed through him. He pressed his palm to his head and tried to use the Force to alleviate his headache, but that only seemed to make it worse. More blood trickled out of his nose, and as he reached up to check, he realized blood was leaking from his ears too. He shook his head as if to clear it. "We are sorry? Who are you talking about? We don't know any Taryn Zel."
Tenel Ka didn't answer him, instead hitting her comlink. "Jedi Knight Tekli, please prepare a bay for our friend Zekk. The mission was a success, the twin explosions have taken out a majority of the Killik forces on the ground. But the cost…it might not have been worth it."
-)[-IV-](-
Anakin Solo paced on the bridge of the *Sunrider*, the three battlefields arrayed before him on the holo-table like a game of dejaarik. Next to him was the holo-image of his older brother, studying a similar table onboard his ship many lightyears away.
"*It doesn't look good, Anakin*," Jacen said. "*We've inflicted heavy losses on the Killiks, killed several of their queens and annihilated whole hives, but Welk isn't coming. I don't know how much long our forces can keep this up*."
"For as long as they need to," Anakin murmured distractedly. He then ran a hand through the image before him and depressed a button. "Control, send word to my sister, the bugs are going to try and bypass her fleet. She can't stay hunkered down like she is."
"*Anakin, Jaina's forces are outnumbered ten-to-one at least. If she engages the Killiks they'll be shredded*."
"And if she doesn't engage those forces, Jagged Fel's group will have an additional hundred Killik cruisers and support vessels to deal with. We already know that a second wave of Killik ships arrived from the Core-worlds. Kind of wondering what Denon was thinking letting them slam us too. But if you want to give Jagged and General Antilles more bugs to play with then fine," Anakin answered, his tone slightly annoyed. "I know what I'm doing here, Jace. Jaina will come up with something, she's a Solo after all."
"Order sent, sir."
Anakin turned his attention to another part of the holo-table. "Have Tenel Ka and Admiral Bres-Durron split their fleet. We need at least

five cruisers to reinforce Moff Fel's position. The Killiks are about to cut him off from General Antilles."
"*Anakin."*
"I know Zekk and Tenel Ka's plan relies on having as many ships as possible," Anakin muttered. "But their plan also hinges on the other groups holding their own as well. So I'm going to keep the balance between these battlefields as best I can. We just need to buy more time. Welk *will* come. He can't afford not to."
"*And if you run out of pawns to move*?" Jacen said darkly.
"Then I run out of pawns and start sacrificing my Kintan Striders," Anakin snapped. "Look, Jace. I appreciate your input and all, but coordinating three *very* different battles in three sectors is not exactly a walk in the park. Unless you can tell me something I don't already know…"
"*Your forces are being exhausted*," Jacen said tersely. "*They've been battling the Killiks almost non-stop for over two months. All without rest, reinforcements, and fresh supplies. I'm not sure how much attention you're paying to the meld, but even the Jedi under our command are reaching their limits. You can balance the numbers all you want, but if our soldiers start dropping dead from mental errors, making mistakes in their fatigue, then those numbers are going to just go out of whack all over again*."
"Then why don't you use your divine influence and get us out of this mess?" Anakin said sarcastically. "You're the one with the direct-line to the bug mind. Tell Welk to stop biding his time and get his insectoid butt over here."
"*It's not that simple*."
"Isn't it?" Anakin said. "I know you've picked up more than your share of mind-manipulation tricks during your four-year tour of ancient Force cultures. I also know you couldn't care less about the dark side now."
"*If I use the Force in that way while connected to all the Jedi whose strength is making my connection to the Kind possible, I'll also be hurting them*," Jacen said. "*They're sharing their strength and energy with me on good-faith*."
"Jacen, think about what you're saying. You're already using their energy to trick an entire race into committing genocide against our forces. What's one step further? Welk wouldn't hesitate to do what must be done."
"*And I know you didn't just compare me to an insane dark sider*," Jacen rebuked.
"Fine, I'll make it simple. Aside from your false care of all the other Jedi in the meld, and we both know you couldn't care less about the Order

the way it is now, what's stopping you from reaching out, finding Welk and forcing him to engage our forces?"
"*It's the way the Kind works, Anakin. In Welk's point of view, he's already engaging us. The Killiks fighting in Geroon, Ilum, and the Utegetu Nebula are all Welk so to speak. He sees what they see, learns what they learn. It doesn't matter that he's not physically here, because in a way, all those Killiks and Joiners are Welk*."
"There's more," Anakin noted, then held up a hand to stop his brother's response as he noticed something else on the holo-table. "Control, get word to General Antilles. Tell him to move his forces to the following coordinates, it'll give him at least a few weeks of time."
"*There is more, Anakin*," Jacen spoke. "*I thought you wanted the Jedi Order to separate from the Senate and government. The more <u>we</u> do, the less likely that will happen*."
"So, you're holding back for political reasons?"
"*I didn't say that*."
"Sure sounded like it," Anakin said glibly, his eyes rapidly flying over the three battlefields. "Control, send word to the following cruisers in our fleet and have them reinforce my sister. Three is not much, but it's better than nothing."
"*What I mean, Anakin, is that we'll burn the Jedi Order out at this rate. We have nearly all the able-bodied apprentices and younger Knights fighting with us. We have the entire Order engaged in the mass-meld to keep the Killiks interested in dustballs of a world. The more we draw on the Order, the less it will be able to do in the immediate future. Already a tenth of the Jedi with us have fallen in battle. The meld has less minds reinforcing it each day because the strain of a trans-galactic broadcast is no walk in the park either. Heck, even Zekk is out of the fight now and Tesar lost his tail again after going EV. Stop looking at everyone as variables and numbers*."
"Numbers and variables?" Anakin answered back. "At the rate we're going, we'll all just kill each other out here and leave the rest of the galaxy vulnerable to whatever threat comes next. You say I'm running our forces into the ground? Damned right I am. The alternative is dragging this war out for years to come. Getting Force knows how many inhabited worlds involved in this affair. Heck, it's been eight years since the Yuuzhan Vong War has ended and the galaxy *still* hasn't recovered in any true fashion. So space your fatigue, your 'they're all living beings not pawns' speeches. I am well aware of that. What I am also aware of is what comes next. Do I want to leave the galaxy in a state that will force Tahiri and I back off Zonama in another few years time? Do I want my children to have to deal with messes our

generation should have put to bed ages ago? We're all soldiers here, all volunteered to protect everyone else. So if you have to do it, then go all out and get Welk's command cruiser here."
"*I've tried, Anakin. But nothing is working*."
"Use different bait."
"*What, then? The Killiks are slowly winning on all fronts, and thoughts of imminent victory didn't faze him. He doesn't care about that any more. I tried the 'we're losing and need help' tract and that didn't work either. It only caused the forces on Ilum and Geroon to surge*."
"Tell Welk that I'm waiting for him," Anakin said after a moment's thought. "Tell him that he won't achieve true victory until I'm dead."
"*Why would he go for that*?"
"Based on Lomi and Raynar, the three of them blamed me for their little crash and bug-i-fication. I'm betting Welk still feels *really* strongly about that. "
"*Again, he wouldn't be able to separate himself from the rest of the Kind. Sending out that message might just have all three Killik fleet-groups head your way instead*."
"Then help him separate himself," Anakin said.
"*It really isn't that simple*."
"Jysella Horn did it to Alema. Alema did it to Zekk. We've had countless examples during this war of Jedi forcefully pulling individuals from the Kind using the Force."
"All *were recently Joined. The longer a mind is in the Kind, the less likely it will have survived intact*."
"I don't want Welk's mind intact." Anakin said grimly. "I just want him aware enough to differentiate between his body and the Killik hive he's Joined to. He needs to be motivated personally to get out here. Otherwise what everyone is fighting for right now will go to waste."
"*I'll do my best, Anakin. But the Force is rarely that straight forward. If I put additional pressure on Welk, the Killik forces might be stirred into a frenzy*."
"Then I'll send out a warning," Anakin said, hands curling into fists on the holo-table. "We went into this knowing that we'd at best be able to slow the Killik onslaught. It was just a matter of when our forces will break, not if. Get Welk out in the open so we can cut off his influence to the Kind. The battle will go that much easier with him out of the picture."
-)[-V-](-
Moff Jagged Fel knew that if kept scowling he'd have a permanent crease on his forehead. Yet, his other option was to be perpetually worried about their situation. It was easier to glare at the offending

datapads than let their meaning get to him. Sure his and General Antilles' fleet were bleeding the Killiks, but the Killiks were similarly reducing the GA forces' numbers as well. They couldn't keep up the pace, and they were also running out of nebula to hide in.

He was stirred from his thoughts by the sound of alarms blaring throughout his ship. He heard several explosions echo through the hull, and knew right away that they were under attack.

"Moff Fel to the bridge, urgent!"

Jagged exited his office, striding onto a bridge full of action.

"Sir! Interdiction field is active, we can't run!"

Jagged looked out the bridge viewport and saw the problem. A dozen Killik capital ships and a myriad of support vessels were practically on their doorstep. And it wasn't the haphazardly put-together Shard cruisers, but the advanced Killik-unique spitcrete cruisers with shield and gravity-well generators. The Killik vessels were firing relentlessly, their weapons blowing chunks out of his ship and the three others in his small fleet.

"Deploy all starfighters, have the carriers and support vessels make a break for it, and cover their retreat with the cruisers." Jagged ordered, the glow of the Tusken Eye's sun flashing by as the Star Destroyer dove hard. "Target the enemy engines, keep our ship moving!"

The quartet of Chiss Star Destroyers that made up his cruiser compliment maneuvered into the incoming Killik fire as the frigates and light-support ships headed in the opposite direction as fast as their engines would allow. Turbolaser and ion fire poured out of the Star Destroyers, raking the much larger Killik forces indiscriminately.

The Killik forces returned the favor, and they had many more guns. The Star Destroyers quickly wilted under the withering barrage, their maneuvers for naught as the entire area appeared lit up by turbolasers.

"The *Starfell*'s reactor was hit!"

Jagged looked towards the Chiss Star Destroyer off their port side. Great gouts of flame were flaring at multiple points on the ship as five of the Killik cruisers poured turbolaser bolts into it. As advanced as it was, even its shield generators couldn't handle the concentrated barrage. There was a blinding flash, and the entire ship was engulfed in a bubble of white light, its pieces blowing outwards with tremendous force.

And then the firing began to focus on his ship.

"Hull breaches, decks five through ten!"

"Suicide fighter damaged the hangar bay!"

"Watch out!"

Two middle-sized Killik light-attack vessels took up strafing positions on the *Eternal Dynast* and proceeded to broadside the Chiss Star Destroyer with rapid-fire energy. The *Eternal Dynast* returned fire, but its turrets were targeted by the swarms of dartfighters flitting about mere meters above the hull.
Jagged was thrown off his feet as a particularly loud explosion echoed through the ship.
"The *Gemini* and *Fiend* are moving to assist," a bloodied console operator announced, pulling himself back into his chair.
The two Killik broad-siders were downed by a volley of missiles and turbolasers, becoming floating wrecks in mere seconds. But the Killiks still came. A whole swarm of dartfighters immolated themselves into the *Eternal Dynast*, one after another until the last fighter literally blew out the other side of the massive hole they had just made on the prow.
"Receiving communication from VibroSword Leader, sir! She's requesting permission to abandon our stern and launch a counter-attack on the c-and-c bug ship."
"How does she know which one is which? They all look the same," Jagged spat out a glob of blood.
"She says her droid performed a tactical analysis. It's seventy-percent certain that it's identified the command ship."
"Permission granted," Jagged said. "And tell Syal to get the heck out of here once her job is done."
"Yes, sir."
Another explosion. "Sir, they knocked out our bridge deflector shields!"
Jagged straightened as best as he could. The bridge was a mess of debris, loose wires, exploded consoles, and cracked viewports.
"Intensify forward fire power. Angle us thirty-degrees down, five to port."
"Thirty-degrees down, five to port, aye!"
The badly damaged Star Destroyer cut through the clouds of space-dust as it tried to limp away. The other two capital ships in the fleet provided what support they could, but soon they too were besieged by the Killik fleet in pursuit.
"Head for these coordinates," Jagged's fingers flew across the control console. "Have all fighters jump to hyperspace if they're able."
"Sir! That'll take us into the corona of the Tusken's Eye."
"The spitcrete ships are made of organic material," Jagged said in turn. "They may be as hard as metal, but they do not have the same properties. They'll burn up before we do."
"Course set."

The surviving bridge-crew almost held their breath as the white-dwarf of the system's sun grew ever larger. The windows polarized, but even that was insufficient to keep the glare from filling the bridge. The prow was the first to show signs of the intense heat. Despite the shielding, it began to glow, faintly at first, but then much more pronounced.
"The Killiks are continuing pursuit, we're down to three engines now. Shields failing."
Jagged kept his face emotionless.
"Hull temperature is rising. Reports of more deck failures levels fifteen and seventeen."
The prow turned white, armored plating flying off in super-heated globs. At the same time, however, the Killik fighters that had been swarming over every nook and cranny of the Star Destroyer were popping off like popcorn.
"Killik missile took out another engine. Structural integrity collapsing along Deck Eight. Sir, if we lose another engine, we won't have the power to escape the sun's pull."
"Use the gravity of the sun to sling-shot us out the other side," Jagged commanded.
A distant explosion peppered the ship with debris.
"The *Fiend* just went up."
"Entering the corona now!" The entire ship shuddered under the sun's powerful heat and gravitational pull. The very front of the Star Destroyer, already weakened by the suicidal dives of the dartfighters, disintegrated completely. The heavily damaged Star Destroyers, miniscule in size compared to its backdrop, continued to defy the odds, streaming, steaming, pushing forward.
"Inform me when we're ready to slingshot. On my command, full thrust forward and release all ordnance aft. Order the *Gemini* to do the same."
"Killik forces pulling back. The corona is playing havoc with our sensors so I don't know how far."
"Stay the course," Jagged breathed, beads of sweat pouring down his face as the bridge continued to heat, nearing uncomfortable levels.
"Five seconds!"
Another part of the *Eternal Dynast*'s prow vanished in a flash, shaking the vessel and making the ship very much unrecognizable from its former triangle shape.
"Slingshot coordinates!"
"Execute orders."
The surviving engines glowed almost as bright as the sun as it worked with the sun's gravity and propelled the two Star Destroyers away at

high speed. A split second later two small novae visible from many lightminutes away appeared next to the Tusken's Eye
The Killiks, no longer detecting their foe, came to the conclusion that they had destroyed themselves trying to escape. As far as they were concerned, the threat they had come to eliminate was no more. Forming up, the Killik fleet reversed course and jumped to lightspeed.
-)[-VI-](-
Jaina Solo was in a similar predicament. Impossible odds, a dwindling fleet, and decreasing area she could run. The Killiks hadn't taken the loss of their planet-blowing-up sphere-of-doom too happily. After an initial period where they had been stunned into inaction, the Killik fleet had recovered and vigorously pressed their attack. Enraging a hornet's nest, kicking over an ant-hill, sticking a hand into a den of scorpions, whatever bug-metaphor one could use to describe a mass of pissed off insects, the Killiks were it.
"Loiric Kaan reports heavy damage to his command ship. He's requesting permission to launch a 'glorious sacrifice in the name of Yun Yuuzhan,'" a sensor operator announced.
"I wish," Jaina muttered under her breath. "No, have him pull back."
"You're telling me to order a fanatical Yuuzhan Vong to retreat?"
"Good point," Jaina blinked. "Give me the comm."
"Comm's yours."
With as much enthusiasm she could muster, Jaina called upon the Force around her to make her look 'godlike'. She wasn't sure how her image would appear over the villip, but she wasn't taking any chances.
"War Master Loiric Kaan, of the esteemed Domain Kaan, adjunct of Domain Choka, this is your Goddess Yun-Harla speaking to you and your men. I have in mind a particularly nasty trick up my sleeve that requires you and yours to withdraw to a safe distance behind Geroon's moon. This is not a retreat but a tactical feint that will lead the Killiks to their doom. You and your men can die for the glory of the Yun'o, but not today. Respond."
A very long several seconds ticked by, but then Loiric's scarred visage appeared. "*I hear and obey, Goddess of Tricks and Deception*."
"Yuuzhan Vong fleet withdrawing. Supreme Overlord Ariarsh's forces moving in to cover the retreat."
"Great, now the easy part is done," Jaina wiped a bead of sweat from her brow.
"Ma'am?"
"The hard part is coming up with the plan that will impress those die-hard fanatics," Jaina deadpanned. "One that doesn't involve exploding moons, planets, or other heavenly bodies."

"Killiks are sending dropships down to Geroon."
"Good and…"
"Ma'am! The Chiss fleet just launched a series of pods down to the surface."
"Oh for the love of…put the Assistant Syndic on," Jaina grumbled, her gaze half focused on the *Megador*'s barrage of covering fire. The Killiks had abandoned targeting the other ships and were now making a beeline for the Super Destroyer she was on.
"*Jedi Solo*."
"Please tell me you didn't just shoot a whole bunch of planet-destroying things onto Geroon."
"*I did not*."
"No suicidal force?"
"*No*."
"Are you going to keep me guessing?"
"*It is a weapon of Chiss design. One of last resort that was perfected in the time we were stationed here with the help of the Yuuzhan Vong Shapers*." Irolia answered evenly.
Jaina rubbed her face and held up three fingers. "A few things… weapons of Chiss design are normally sadistic in nature, your disintegrating masers for example. Last resort weapons are normally sadistic in nature and reek of desperation, Omega Blue. And perfecting something like that with Shapers? Let me guess it'll go against my Jedi sensibilities and that's why you didn't inform me."
"*Precisely*."
Jaina bit back her first thoughts. She knew she had damaged her relationship with the Chiss and Vagaari for forcing them to save the Geroon. She just hoped that damaged relationship didn't get them all killed in the end. "Okay, so what did you just send down to Geroon?"
"*A parasite bomb*."
"Irolia," Jaina said flatly.
"*Genetically engineered parasites designed to slowly kill anything using the chemical make-up of Killik-nature. Joiners and otherwise*."
"How slowly?"
"*The break-down of major internal organs was predicted after several months, during which time the parasite will multiply and act as a highly infectious pathogen capable of being passed on through bodily fluids*."
"So a slow and painful death then?"
"*From my understanding, yes. We don't have to engage the Killiks once they occupy the planet, we only need to keep them from escaping*."
"Wonderful."

"*Look on the bright side, Jedi Solo. We're not destroying the Geroon's precious homeworld*."
"And you couldn't have shared this information earlier?"
"*The defeat of our forces and subsequent retreat needed to be realistic. Additionally, we did not know if the weapon would work until last week*."
"Fine, we let the damned bugs have the planet then," Jaina gritted out. *When had genocide become an acceptable option in warfare?* "Comm, send word to the rest of the fleet, begin a full withdraw from Geroon's orbit. Make it a fighting retreat though, as the Assistant Syndic said, the bugs need to believe they've won. It shouldn't be that hard to convince them considering we won't get our victory any time soon."
-)[-V-](-
The Battle of Ilum was raging full-throttle all across the planet and in its orbit. Jysella Horn's force had succeeded in reducing the number of ships the Killiks could throw at the planet, but even then the number was still impressive. In space, Mandalorian *Keldabe*-Mark Three cruisers were fighting alongside Hapan Battle Dragons and Bothan Assault Cruisers in a proverbial slugging match. Gladiators, Miy'til, Bothan *Fenn*-interceptors worked in perfect Force-assisted synchronization, taking on the streams of enemy fighters thrown at them. With Doran, Tenel Ka, and Yaqeel leading their respective fleets, the Force helped them hold their ground against the armada arrayed against them. If one were looking up from the ground, they'd see an almost nightly ritual of distant explosions and flaring contrails of stricken ships.
On the ground, the emplacements and trenches that had been set up the previous months were getting a full work-out. The twin explosions had annihilated a sizable portion of the ground forces. Which was great considering millions of ground troops had been landed. Not so great when one realized there were still millions left even after the blasts. The Killiks, disorientated and bewildered after the explosions, had taken heavy casualties on all fronts.
But they recovered quickly and surged en masse towards the GA positions with frightening speed and ferocity. Kolosolok, swarms of assassin bugs, blaze and razor bugs, and all manner of Killik ground troopers assaulted every location the GA had people in.
The GA forces retaliated by pulling every science trick in the book. They used Yuuzhan Vong seeders to seed the Ilum air with chemicals that neutralized the pheromones used by the Killiks to communicate. They sent in their Vong-modified Killiks to confuse and distress the enemy bugs. Pesticides made from ancient Alderaanian specifications

were lobbed into whole battalions of enemy Killiks by specially equipped artillery shells. It was a not a pretty sight.
But still the Killiks endured. They burrowed into the ground to avoid the air laden with chemicals, they threw hundreds of warriors at locations that had only a few squads defending them. What the Killiks lacked in strategy they more than made up in numbers.
Three and a half months, over a hundred and ten days, of non-stop fighting in the freezing cold of Ilum had sapped the strength of many of the defenders, but still they pushed on. Lasers of all colors flew back and forth, some reflecting off the occasional lightsaber seen in the trenches. Unlike the defenders, the millions of Killiks had little need for sleep and would press their attack in relentless waves that crashed upon the defenders like ocean waves on the shore. The exhausted defenders didn't give up, however, and still put up a fierce resistance despite the odds.
Shaven-head, Jedi Knight Zekk watched it all from the viewport of the medical frigate. It had been three and a half months since the fighting had broken out. Almost fifty days since the Yuuzhan Vong tailored cocktail that had helped him temporary Join fried his brain. The Force helped greatly, but his coordination, his memories, everything was off. To make matters more complicated, Tekli and several Yuuzhan Vong shapers had 'shaped' his brain back to what it was before the 'Joining' so he no longer had any link to the Killiks at all.
His memories.
Zekk closed his green eyes at that thought. How was one to remember if one didn't know what he had forgotten? Names, faces, places, events. Darkest Knight, Jedi Knight, Jaina Solo, Tenel Ka. He supposed he should be lucky that he remembered his name at least. His name and who he was, a Jedi Knight of the New Jedi Order. He remembered Tekli, barely. Recalling vaguely that she had been the healer on the Myrkr mission and not much else. Mallie Marek, he had a feeling that the name should mean something, even had vague memories of a beautiful blond woman sharing his bed, but it was lost in the fog he couldn't seem to escape.
And then there was Taryn Zel.
Taryn and Trista if he remembered what Tekli had told him. From what he could gather, he and Taryn had been an item, lovers even. But he couldn't remember a single thing about her. He had a holo of her on the table in front of him, but nothing came to him no matter how long he studied the image. Meditation had no effect, neither did any of the healing techniques an increasingly frustrated Tekli employed.

He had looked up his medical report, though he couldn't understand most of the notes. From what he could gather, his mind, to protect itself from the effects of the Joining, had more or less begun destroying itself—starting with the section that contained his memories. There was nothing to recover because the cells holding those memories were dead. In fact, it was thanks to the Vong cocktail that his mind hadn't melted down even faster. Tekli still held out hope that he'd recover said memories, but as the days went by, Zekk was beginning to feel more and more like he'd have to spend the rest of his life without them.

"*Primary Medical Team to Hangar Bay Five*," an announcement came over the intercom.

Zekk tore his gaze away from the scene below, watching the medical team rush by the doorway of his room. A second later, Tekli's small form followed suit, though she skidded to a halt the moment she saw him.

"Zekk, come with us."

"Tekli?"

"Come on!"

Blinking, Zekk nodded obediently and hurried after the Chadra Fan healer and her apprentice.

"What's going on?"

"Hapan Commando Squad Alpha was hit hard in that last surge," Tekli explained.

"Alpha Squad? That's the one Taryn is in?"

"Yeah," Tekli's eyes darted upwards for a second.

"Just remembering what I read in the report you gave me," Zekk quickly shook his head.

The healer's disappointment spiked. "At least your short-term memory wasn't damaged."

"So why do you need me?"

"Taryn Zel is onboard the transport," Tekli said tersely. "The report is that she's near death."

"Okay," Zekk said slowly, still not understanding why the Chadra Fan needed him. He wasn't a healer by any means. At least, not that he could remember. "Still not seeing where I come in."

Tekli muttered several curses under her breath, her jaw clenched for a moment as she tried to calm herself. "You may not remember her at all, or even feel a shred of anything now, but she has very strong feelings for you. Just being nearby may give her the strength she needs to pull through."

They arrived in the hangar bay, a battle-damaged shuttle just pulling in as they did. It was smoking, looking like it had taken several direct missile hits but refused to succumb. Fire-crews quickly doused the smoking wreck with flame-retardant, repair bots swarming just like the medics were as they waited for the ship's cargo.
"How many wounded?" Tekli looked to another medical officer, Hapan Royal Surgeon Lalu Morwan.
"Pilot says six wounded. Her Highness is a priority," the Hapan officer said.
"Did we get the fresh blood supply from the *Royal Blood*?" Tekli asked, referring to the second medical frigate.
"Bringing it in now," another medical officer nodded. He handed Tekli a datapad. "The injuries look bad ma'am. Even with bacta…"
"The Force will guide us," Tekli said reassuringly, though more out of reflex than anything else.
The ramp to the shuttle lowered and Alpha Squad's new medic Mirala Chell pushed out the first hover-stretcher. Without pause, she began to relate the necessary vitals and condition. "BP is 90 over 50, pulse thready. She's already crashed once. Left lung collapsed, major lacerations to her midsection and severe internal bleeding..."
Zekk watched with an odd sense of detachment as the swarm of medical professionals hurried to the stretcher. The figure on it was a red-haired young woman, her skin sheet white from the loss of blood. Try as he might, he didn't feel any differently for her than the countless injured soldiers that had been brought onboard since his stay. It was that same detachment he felt as he watched Mirala pushed out another stretcher, this one carrying a tall blond woman who was missing one arm and both her feet.
"Zekk get over here!" Tekli yelled, piercing though his daze. Her apprentice was already helping the healers with the blond soldier. Zekk shook himself and went over to the stretcher of the red-haired commando. "What do you want me to do?"
"Hold her hand, use the Force and try to make her as comfortable as possible. We need her to last until we can get her into a bacta tank."
"I thought they were all being used," Zekk said grimly.
"Exactly," Tekli's eyes flashed. "And every patient right now is in critical condition so we can't flush one early despite the Flight Surgeon's insistence. One life is not more valuable than the next. We'll need to rely on the Force to keep her alive."
Tekli sat on the side of the stretcher, her hands working fast as she tried to stem the bleeding from several wounds. Zekk pushed the cart

along as gently as he could, staring down at the young woman it held. "So this is Taryn Zel?"
"I'm sure she'd have liked to be reunited with you under different circumstances," Tekli said dryly, finishing one set of stitches and hurrying to another.
"What's she like?" Zekk asked softly, calling on the Force to seep away any pain the commando might be feeling. After all, she had a vicious disemboweling slice across her stomach and a large puncture wound in each of her shoulders. Add to that what looked like acid burns, and it was a miracle that she was still even breathing.
"I…" Tekli refocused on the woman she was healing. "You would have known best. Hapan Royalty, as you know from our friend the Queen Mother, are a closed off private sort. If you weren't present, Taryn Zel only showed her professional side. From what little I saw when you two were together, she seemed to be the perfect foil to your broody nature. Here, toss me that blood pack."
Zekk robotically did as told, still trying to imagine the type of woman he'd let get so close as to become his lover.
"Damn it, she's lost too much blood. Give me the second pack."
"Anything more I can do to help?" Zekk said faintly.
Tekli's snout twitched as she continued to work, Taryn's blood coating her hands and robes. "Your blood type is universal, she might need some of it if I can't get these veins closed. If we keep the clamps on them for too long…"
Zekk pushed the stretcher into the packed med-bay. The three-dozen bacta tanks set up in the bay were all full with pilots, soldiers, and engineers, many missing a limb or two. All around med-droids were tending to lesser wounded soldiers, administering medicine and pain-killers. The war was fast going through the supplies the GA force had brought with them and seemed in no hurry to slow down.
"Bring her to operating bay two," Tekli instructed, dismounting from the stretcher. She gestured to a med-droid and rattled off a list of equipment for it to prepare. "Zekk, I've used the Force to put her into a temporary stasis to keep her stable, I need to check on the others that were brought in with her. But I'll be back as soon as I am able."
Zekk nodded, angling the stretcher into the bay and stood at the side of the downed commando. As the hustle and bustle of the med-bay continued, he looked down at the young woman, tuning everything else out. Seconds ticked by slowly.
Even with her wounds and blood loss she continued to fight for her life. Absently, he gently gripped one of her lifeless hands in one of his, willing his warmth into her pale limb. When that did little to improve

her condition, he surrounded the downed commando with his Force presence, using the Force to try and mend what wounds he could. The rest of the med-bay seemed to fade away, all the beeps and chirps of the machinery, the urgent voices of the medical staff, everything. He focused solely on her unconscious form, trying desperately to recall something, anything about her. He knew that if they were lovers then it wouldn't be a casual fling. That they would have to be partners, equals, he wouldn't want any other relationship. If she was trying so hard to fight for her life, then he'd be amiss of he didn't help her any way he could.
He might not remember her, but for him, in that moment, it didn't matter. He would still do his part, still back her up and fight for whatever they had, just as she was doing now. If it took days for her to get a bacta tank, then that was how long he'd be at her side.
Slowly, some color returned to her, and the hand he was holding reflexively gripped his.
Zekk let his own eyes drift close, trying to find something to cling to, to look forward to, in the chaos of the war he was in. *Stay alive, Lady Zel. Please give me the chance to get to know you once more.*
-)[-Chapter End-](-

Denon
-)[-I-](-
"*I'd like to thank all those in the Senate who voted for me. I promise that their faith is not misplaced. As my first act as Chief of State of this stalwart Galactic Alliance, I am ordering an immediate review of all reconstruction projects instituted under the Omas Administration. It is only when this government stops hemorrhaging credits that we can truly begin to rebuild. Change requires credits, that has always been clear. So let us all change this galaxy for the better*."
The mood in the Skywalker apartment on Denon was not a happy one, nor was it angry. If one walked in, they would feel the resigned demeanor of those listening to Kenth Hamner. The result had long been expected, it just didn't mean it was a welcome one.
"*Furthermore*," Kenth Hamner continued. "*I am dissolving the Outer Rim Relief Council and Outer Rim Security Fleets. Billions of credits are spent on both, and they have had little to show for it. It will now be up to the Outer Rim governments to police their own territories. If they will not take the time and effort to ensure their own trade routes are secure, then I don't see why the rest of the galaxy should keep giving them handouts. By trimming these and many other expenses of this*

bloated government, this government can finally begin to return to its roots. We will be great once more, I can promise you that."
"The only good news is that he didn't immediately order the Jedi Order to take over in their place," Mara Jade Skywalker grumbled.
"Give him a chance, Mara," Leia said to her sister-in-law, watching Cassa try to teach Ben, Janek and Kani some words in Yuuzhan Vong. "Many of his proposals do have a chance of making this galaxy better."
"At the expense of the Jedi Order. We're going to burn ourselves out if we try to be the superheroes he's making us out to be," Mara protested.
"There is that downside," Leia nodded. "But in actuality he's advocating for a smaller government. One that isn't so constrained by bureaucracy and corruption. By focusing the Galactic Alliance's attention on Core-ward systems first, the few resources we do have available can be used a lot more efficiently. He wouldn't have won by a landslide if he was just venting hot air."
"And if your kids hadn't decided to be heroes, your way to fix the galaxy was?"
"It would have been slower," Leia admitted. "What Kenth is putting forward will create a whole lot of fixes fast, will create a whole lot of problems too. Namely the Jedi one. But the people are tired of waiting for change after Omas' nine years in office. Hopefully, Kenth can get the galaxy in some semblance of working order so it can be easier fixed later on down the line."
"Then all those meetings you had these past few months were for nothing?"
"Not nothing," Leia smiled. "When Anakin and the others headed off for the Outer Rim, I anticipated Kenth winning the election and saw the problems his proposals will create. All those meetings as you call them were to help head off a majority of those problems before they caused too much trouble."
Mara chuckled. "Have fun playing politics again, then?"
"I wouldn't say fun," Leia said with a sheepish grin. "But it did feel good. I spent most of my youth as a politician. Took a short break during the Yuuzhan Vong War. Never realized how much I missed some aspects of it."
"Spoken like a true politician," Mara smirked. She then sobered. "All those meetings wouldn't by any chance help with the Jedi problem?"
"Unfortunately, no. Kenth's plan to involve the Jedi in more aspects of the government would have overriden any effort I put into having them step back. Instead, I just laid the ground work so that if and when we do pull the Jedi Order back, the government can function just fine."

"Not if the government becomes so reliant on the Jedi Order with all of Hamner's plans." Mara said disgruntledly.
Leia nodded distractedly. Cassa had stopped talking with the others and had gone to the apartment balcony window, her gaze directed to the sky. "Cassa, sweetie?"
The six year old girl closed her eyes and focused, the others in the room feeling the Force pool around her as if she was siphoning all the energy around her. When she opened her eyes again, they were wide and excited. "Mommy's coming back!"
Mara and Leia exchanged worried glances, both reflexively reaching out to check Anakin's condition. They both knew it would take something drastic for the petite young woman to leave Anakin's side.
"Are you sure?"
"Mommy's all grumpy, but she's coming back," Cassa said with an eager nod.
"Great, family trip to the spaceport then," Mara announced, clapping her hands once and standing. "Ben, Janek, Kani."
"Wonder why she's back so early. The battle can't be over already, can it?" Kani asked.
"We'll find out. But if Tahiri's as grumpy as Cassa says, I doubt it," Leia said, lifting Jayce out of his playpen and patting the twelve-month old child on his back as he gurgled happily.
"But it's been two months since the news people said that fighting had started," Janek spoke up. "How long does a war last anyways?"
"Until someone gives up. Like the Yuuzhan Vong did in their war," Ben told his younger brother.
"But you said the Killiks didn't give up. And Cousin Anakin won't give up either, right?"
"In that case, it's whoever's left standing," Ben said sagely.
"Enough," Mara said with a tight smile. "No sense guessing what's happened. Wait until we hear what Tahiri has to say."
"Yes, mom," both boys said in unison.
"I wish Anakin and Jacen were that obedient," Leia grumbled playfully, taking Cassa's hand as the group walked out to the speeder bay.
"Do you think she's come back because of that Vong force parked outside of the Bothan system?" Kani asked. "It was all over the news. How their Supreme Command threatened to turn the planet into another Sernpidal if the ones who attacked Zonama were not surrendered to them."
"Can't be," Mara said with a frown. "The time to get from Chiss Space to here is quite a while. Tahiri would had to have left before the escalations happened if she's here now."

"Oh," Kani blinked wildly. "Then who's going to stop the Vong? The newscasters said that all available ships are tied up on guard duty. That because Bothawui isn't a part of the GA that no one is going to help them."
"I'm sure that's on Tahiri's to-do list," Leia said dryly. "If anyone has a chance to talk the Supreme Commander down it's her."
"Yeah," Ben piped up again. "They wouldn't even let the last GA diplomats board, and they killed the Bothan ones."
"How do you know that?" Mara frowned, piloting their speeder through traffic.
"Errr…I asked the intel people really nicely?"
"Try again, buster."
"One of their people left a datapad behind at the diner down the street," Ben said. "It had all sorts of information on it."
Mara silently used the Force to control her rising blood-pressure.
"Beeeen."
"I gave it to Master Klin-Fa at the Jedi Temple," Ben said quickly. "She said she'd take care of it."
"Do you truly think war is going to break out between the Bothan and Vong?" Kani asked, looking distressed at yet another conflict.
"I would hope not," Leia said evenly. "The Bothans can't afford to wage one with most their armed forces with Anakin's group. If any fighting does break out it's going to be a slaughter,"
As their speeder made its way through the spaceport, the Skywalker-Solo clan felt Tahiri's transport fly by overhead.
"One way or another, something has to be done," Mara breathed. "And we're going to have the front row seats when things start rolling."
-)[-II-](-
Tahiri Solo's foul mood was offset by the presence of both her children waiting for her in the docking bay. Having spent two months in hyperspace travel brooding on the decision to leave her childhood best-friend behind in a war zone, she would be the first to admit that her negatude was at unhealthy dummy-Hero Boy levels. But sensing both Jayce and Cassa again washed all of that away and she was suddenly reminded just how much she had missed them. The moment the airlock cycled, she didn't even wait for the landing ramp to extend and dropped down from the ship in a blur of motion.
Cassa was there waiting with a broad smile on her face, her little brother very unsteady on his feet standing at her side.
"Mommy!" Cassa beamed.
Tahiri enfolded both in a crushing hug, her eyes squeezing close as she surrounded them with her Force presence and brought in their own.

She then stepped back, gazing at the both of them with tearful green eyes. "Force I've missed the both of you."
"We've missed you too mommy," Cassa breathed, her hands gripping Tahiri's robes. "When's daddy going to be back?"
Tahiri forced an encouraging smile on her face. "As soon as he's done saving the galaxy, Cass."
"Oh, so not that long then," the six year old said perkily.
"Yeah," Tahiri closed her eyes once more to collect herself. She decided to switch topic, looking at the lump that had affixed himself to her other shoulder. She dislodged him and set him back on his feet. "And look at you Jayce, walking huh?"
"He took his first steps two months ago," Leia communicated, a sad smile on her face. "We have it on holo so you and Anakin can see it."
"Ma!" Jayce said proudly.
Tahiri blinked, eyes wide. Before she had left, Jayce had been making all sorts of baby sounds, but never anything coherent. "Did you just say…?"
"Ma!" Jayce giggled again, innocent green eyes shining brightly even as he toddled a bit to stay on his feet.
Tahiri looked up to her mother-in-law, a part of her heart melting into an emotional puddle. "And his first word?"
"Words now," Leia said, empathizing with the young mother before her and placing a consoling hand on Tahiri's shoulders. "Started last month. His first word was Sa-sa, for his sister."
"He knows my name!" Cassa proclaimed proudly. "I taught him that. I'm trying to teach him words in other languages too. See I took care of Jayce just like you told me too."
"Yes…you did." Tahiri couldn't help but feel a stray tear escape her eyes. Had she really missed it all? Her son's first steps, his first word, even his first birthday two months earlier? She remembered every one of Cassa's 'firsts', but none of Jayces.
"Mommy?" the very Force-sensitive Cassa whimpered in a little girl way.
"Come here, you," Tahiri gathered both her children up, one in each arm, relishing their presence and that little bit of Anakin that was present in the both of them. "Not going to miss any more important days, you two. The galaxy can burn for all I care. Now we're going to go to wherever you want to eat and get all your favorite foods, then see your favorite holovid. You two are way more important, you got that?"
Cassa nodded definitively, while Jayce, apparently exhausted from all the excitement, rested his head on her shoulder and fell asleep.

"He never falls asleep that fast at Grandma's place," Cassa whispered, eyes wide.
"He just needed his mother," Mara said, her own eyes suspiciously wet.
Tahiri bowed her head slightly. "Master."
"Haven't been your master in ages, Tahiri," Mara waved her off, but stepped forward for a carefully choreographed hug. "How are you?"
Tahiri kissed Cassa on her head. "Much better now. What have I missed?"
"Better to start off with what have you heard," Mara said.
"Caught the holo on the way over. Master Hamner's the new Chief of State. Oh, and I saw that old clip on how the Jedi Council gave the Imperial Jedi an ultimatum a couple weeks back? What was that about?"
Mara made a sour face. "Some in the council don't believe that the practices of the Imperial Jedi are actions of an *actual* Jedi. That true Jedi don't need to learn from former Sith and dark Jedi about dark side powers. Kam Solusar, Kyle Katarn, Tresina Lobi, and Barratk'l are all pushing for the Imperial Jedi to reform themselves or lose the backing of the Jedi Order. Kenth won't admit to it, but it has all the makings of one of his political-Jedi games."
"Master Ramis and Ti?"
"Master Ti has stopped attending the High Council Meetings since the Dathomiri Praxeum went independent. By the way, you can expect that to be on Kenth Hamner's list of targets. He apparently doesn't like Jedi operating outside of the Jedi Order, it ruins his while 'unified front' image. As for Octa, well, her Master was Kyp, that should tell you something."
"Good point," Tahiri laughed softly.
"The issue has taken a back seat for now. Kenth still has to cement his political control over the fractured government and the Killik problem is still causing migranes for the Outer and Mid-Rim powers."
"Probably haven't seen the last of it."
"Definitely not," Mara agreed.
"Well, apart from those two tid-bits, that's about all I know." Tahiri shrugged, walking alongside her family through the spaceport.
"What about the V…"
"Shhh," Mara cut off Janek. "You heard her, family's more important."
"Oh," Janek blinked, not quite understanding.
"Aunt Mara?" Tahiri asked.
"Don't worry about…" Mara trailed off. A group of Yuuzhan Vong were walking down the opposite end of the hallway, noticeable by the fact

that everyone else was hastily getting out of the way. "Okay, never mind. Maybe you do have to worry about it."
Tahiri's lips thinned. "Domain Jamaane."
"Auntie Shaeri's people?" Cassa chirped.
"Her mean side of the family. All the nice Jamaane settled on Zonama, remember?" Tahiri said, trying to keep her voice light. "Go stand with your grandma. I need to have a talk with them."
"You promised," Cassa pouted as Tahiri handed Jayce off to Leia.
"We'll still eat and see the movie," Tahiri said, not liking the clenching feeling in her chest.
Cassa nodded and moved to Leia's side.
"Need back up, Tahiri?" Mara said in a low voice.
"I've got this covered," Tahiri answered, her voice cool and her eyes once again 'chlorine ice'. Her shift into Vongsense caused the three scars on her forehead to appear more prominent to those looking at her, though it could just have easily been a trick of the light. Making a gesture, the squad of heavily armored warriors stopped where they were, and she began to walk towards them.
"[Avatar of Yun-Shuno, we demand an audience!]" In the background, Tahiri could hear Cassa translate what the warrior was saying to the others and grimaced. Warriors were not exactly known for their child-friendly language. Then again, judging by the scowl on the warrior's face, she had much greater problems to deal with.
"[You of Domain Meat Maggot are not in any position to demand anything,]" Tahiri barked back
"[We have when the gods refuse to hear our demand for retribution!]" The lead warrior banged on his vonduum armor plating in emphasis.
"[For nearly a year now the forces of Saluup Fing do nothing but pick their noses and pass gas outside of the home-system of the Infidel Bothans. And they do so on your orders!]"
Tahiri took a step forward, never breaking eye-contact with the taller warrior. "[You dare question an emissary of the Yun'o?]"
"[I see only a weak *Jedaii*!]" The warrior sneered. "[Pale and fragile with abominable metal weapons.]"
Tahiri activated her mother's lightsaber, the white-gold blade stabbing upwards until it rested millimeters from the unflinching chin of the warrior. "[Was that a challenge, sub-commander? Do you truly wish to match weapons with me, Slayer of Tsavong Lah? Feel what the Dread Lord Shimrra felt in his dying breaths when my saber burned out his *mqaaq'it*?]"
"[You cannot claim our traditions when it suits you, One-Who-Was-Shaped,]" the warrior snarled back, deliberately letting the tip of

Tahiri's blade singe the outer layer of skin beneath his chin. "[If you are truly an Avatar for the Yun'o then you will help us eradicate the plague that is the Bothan race. Help us slay every last one of their cowardly peoples and make cloaks from their skins. Otherwise you are even more of a pretender than Omini was! Were I allowed to carry my amphistaff I'd strike you down right here for *your* cowardice!]"
"[You doubt my resolve for our people?]" Tahiri growled, deactivating her saber and shaking her head. "[After everything my family has done for the Yuuzhan Vong?]"
"[Again, resting on your past successes is *not* what a true avatar of the gods would do. Did Tsavong Lah rest after one victory? Did the Dread One stay his hand after deposing the weak Quoreal? No! They continued to fight for our people, they fought for the vision of a *strong* Yuuzhan Vong Empire! One that would bow to no one, wait for no 'galactic' permission to avenge those murdered.]"
"[There would have been no Yuuzhan Vong left to avenge if Tsavong and Shimrra had their way!]" Tahiri barked back, gesturing wildly. "[They built the walls of their empire with the bodies of millions of Yuuzhan Vong! The Yuuzhan Vong nearly went extinct for that vision. The reason why I left my home was *because* I was defending your people, trying to find the truth without needless bloodshed.]"
"[And what have you done these past months? You pandered to the needs of the other races first. Convinced the idiot Loiric—may he die a burning death in the afterglow of one of your infidel engines—to fight your battles for you. The Yun'o abandoned us during the war, and it is clear their false representatives abandon us now.]"
"[I have not, and will *never* forget the needs of the Yuuzhan Vong,]" Tahiri said in a low voice.
"[Then prove it! The Bothans desecrated Yuuzhan'tar, blood must be spilt!]"
Tahiri stared him down. "[Where is your ship?]"
"[Docked at the embassy.]"
"[Take it, go to Saluup Fing. Tell him to expect my arrival. You are right, this issue has gone on for too long. But I will solve this problem *my* way. The way the Yun'o truly intends it to be resolved.]"
The warrior tilted his head a fraction and then spun on his heel and marched off with his comrades in formation.
"Well," Tahiri exhaled, her green eyes warming as she looked back to her family. "That went well."
"I'm guessing I should get the *Shadow* warmed up for a trip to Bothawui?" Mara spoke.

"If you want to come along, sure. I have the *Veila* stationed in orbit. But later," Tahiri said evenly, scooping up both her children again. "First, dinner and a movie, like I promised. *Then* we can go and stop the next galactic-disaster-in-the-making."

-)[-III-](-

Family time didn't last long. It never did when you were at the beck and call of a galaxy on the verge of falling apart at the seams. After dinner, movie, and quality family and sleep time, then came the 'save the galaxy once more' time. Naturally this made Tahiri grumpy. Well, that and not being able to share the family time with her significant other who was on the other side of the galaxy trying to keep evil space bugs from invading.

We will be arriving in the Bothan system in ten minutes, the message flashed across the screen.

"Thanks *Veila*," Tahiri answered evenly, despite the rising anxiety within.

One race or the other, that's what the choice was coming down to. On one hand, there were the traditionalist Bothans who'd rather continue their war of annihilation even if it meant dooming the Bothan people. On the other were the traditional Yuuzhan Vong who were out for blood and more than happy to engage in a genocidal war even if it meant the loss of galactic support.

She exhaled loudly, pounding the console, "*Khapet!*"

"Carpet?" Mara Jade Skywalker said lightly.

Tahiri jumped slightly, blushing. "Sorry. Yuuzhan Vong curse…"

"Thinking deep thoughts?"

"Too much of Anakin's rubbed off on me," Tahiri grumbled, folding her arms in front of her and pouting. "Look at me, I'm a brooding ball of negatude trying to keep two entire races from wiping each other out."

"Definitely a Solo trait," Mara answered, sliding into the co-pilot's seat.

"The kids?"

"Cassa's introducing Ben and Kani to the grutchin. You actually have names for them?"

"What? Oh, right, the grutchin. Of course they have names."

"But they're all bug-like, how can you tell one from the other?"

"*Tchilat* is the one with the slightly bent antennae and black wings," Tahiri answered. "*Khotti* likes playing with her sisters but hates her brothers like crazy. And *Rhas*…"

"I got the idea," Mara laughed, shaking her head. "You do realize that grutchin are weapons of war, right?"

"They're living creatures just like all the other Yuuzhan Vong biots," Tahiri shook her head. "They're only a weapon if we choose to use

them in that manner. Right now they're more like our organic garbage and waste management team. You'd be surprised how quickly those eight can shred apart any spoiled food or left-overs."
"I don't want to know. We're perfectly happy with the *Shadow*'s waste-management system. And you can imagine that we've kind of developed an aversion for bugs."
Tahiri laughed in turn, her expression softening. "Thanks, needed that."
"Yeah," Mara nodded. "Think about it this way, Tahiri. The worst that can happen is that two blood-thirsty races will kill each other off and leave the galaxy a more peaceful place. The best that can happen is that you convince the two to set aside their differences and the galaxy is all the more stronger for it."
Tahiri smiled tiredly. "Put another way, the worst that can happen is that over ten billion sentient beings decide that killing each other is the best way to use said sentience, and the few short-sighted leaders plunge their entire race into a war no one can win. The best that can happen is that I force a change in government, facilitating the deaths of several politicians in the interim, all so the Bothans and Yuuzhan Vong can go back to glaring at each other from afar."
"Definitely spending too much time around my nephew," Mara said flatly.
The ship reverted back to real-space on the very outer edge of the Bothan system. Tahiri was greeted by the sight of nearly five dozen Yuuzhan Vong capital ships squaring off against a much smaller number of Bothan Assault Cruisers. No shots were fired, but fighters were arrayed, shields were up, and weapons were armed and aimed. The Yuuzhan Vong warships were all aging vessels, not used since the war had ended eight years ago. The Bothan warships were all top-of-the-line models proven in combat against the myriad of pirates the Bothans had had to deal with since seceding from the Galactic Alliance. Both sides were willing to die for their cause—in the whole guns-blazing, great ball of fire, blood for blood, non-productive way.
Tahiri tiredly rubbed at her face. "Then again, maybe letting them kill each other off, let a little blood, might be the better choice. Nothing makes chaos more than bottled up hate and grudges."
"You did promise the kids an up-close-and-personal view of how diplomacy works," Mara reminded in amusement. "*Jedi* diplomacy, not Hutt or Mandalorian diplomacy."
"Or Yuuzhan Vong," Tahiri laughed weakly. "Yeah. This should be over relatively quickly. Just have the two sides talk it out and hope the peace we establish today lasts."

Receiving incoming transmission from both the Bothan flag indentifying itself as the Grand Adjudicator and the Yuuzhan Vong Matalok calling itself Divine Retribution. The message scrolled across the screen.
"Which one should I answer first?" Tahiri asked her aunt-in-law.
"Put them both on."
"I want the conversation to be productive."
"Well, which side views you as a goddess whose word cannot be broken?"
"Good point. *Veila* patch me through to the Bothan admiral."
There was a short pause, and then the holo-image of the Bothan fleet commander appeared. Tahiri recognized his image from the various news stories.
"*Jedi Solo*."
"Senator Reh'mwa," Tahiri cocked her head to the side. "Or should I address you as Fleet Admiral?"
"*Supreme Commander is more appropriate*," Reh'mwa responded. "*I fought these blood-thirsty savages during the Vong War, killed a good deal too and would have killed more if not for that blasted treaty*."
"And you're calling me, why?"
"*You have an 'in' with those brutes. Tell them to disarm and retreat and I might just give them a head start before I hunt down every last one of them*."
"I'll see what I can do," Tahiri said noncommittally. "In the mean time, I'm sure someone of your battle experience has enough hold on his men to keep them from firing prematurely. Wouldn't want a fight that would devastate the Bothan Navy, right?"
The former senator inclined his head briefly, and the holo-image disappeared. Tahiri next stroked the villip, and it changed into the face of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet commander.
"*Avatar of Yun-Shuno. As per your orders, I have held my forces back. But their anger is great, Merciful One, and the need for blood grows. Every second Bothawui remains untouched is an affront to our people and way of life. I beg of you, give the word and I will carry out the divine punishment set forth by the Yun'o. Not a single one of those cowardly Bothans will survive*."
Tahiri allowed the muscles in her face to tighten. She was so over this already. "[Stay your hunger just a little bit longer, Supreme Commander. I have only just arrived. Once I have sufficient understanding of this situation, then and only then will I impart *Yun'tchilat*.]"

"*It will be as you say, Divine One. But even a warrior such as myself cannot contain my men's need for bloodshed much longer*."
"Supreme One," Tahiri switched to Basic. She knew that Saluup Fing was on the bridge of his ship and that very few warriors would have taken the time to learn the 'tongue of the infidels'. "Do you intend to slaughter the entire Bothan race, or will the lives of the ones who ordered the heinous attack on Yuuzhan'tar suffice?"
"*The leaders will…one moment…Avatar of Yun-Shuno there is a malfunction with the ship-board dovin basal! Unknown cause! We're…*"
To Tahiri's horror and disbelief, the *Divine Retribution* exploded in dramatic fashion, its yorik coral armor flying outwards, destroying several coralskipper squadrons and damaging a nearby frigate. A split second later, the yammosk vessel began beating out a new pattern, and every Yuuzhan Vong vessel opened fire.
"No!" Tahiri yelled, placing a hand on the viewport.
The Bothans retaliated, lasers and torpedoes trading off with plasma and magma missiles. Ships on both sides succumbed during the first volley, and the rest quickly abandoned their holding positions and accelerated to attack speed. Tahiri could only watch helplessly as the two sides fought on, the outer edge of the Bothan system fast becoming a growing debris field.
Just when it looked as if the Bothans were about to fall back, Reh'mwa's vessel went nova, the explosion starting in its engine block and consuming the entire vessel. The Bothans rallied once more, their fighter-squadrons pummeling smaller Yuuzhan Vong crafts, the Assault Cruisers trading body-blows with Mataloks and Miid Ro'iks.
"What…" Mara was equally at a loss for words.
But then Tahiri spotted a non-standard Yuuzhan Vong vessel streaming forward. She scrambled to put on the cognition hood "*Veila*! Intercept that vessel now!"
"You're taking us into the battle?" Mara said quickly, reaching for the co-pilot's hood.
"Master, that," Tahiri stabbed her finger at the distant vessel. "Is the plague ship Loiric Kaan told me about. It'll make what happened to Bastion look like the common cold if it reaches Bothawui."
"If you fire on it, the Yuuzhan Vong will attack us too."
"And if I don't stop that ship, I'll have just condemned every single Bothan on that planet to a slow and painful death!"
Their ship rocked several times.
A squadron of X-wings has tagged us as a Yuuzhan Vong vessel, the Veila reported. *Minor damage to the engines, but those lasers really hurt.*

Tahiri clenched her jaw. "Aft laser and plasma cannons, try to scare them off."
That just made them angry. They have launched three torpedoes at me. Pin-point defenses tracking them now. I've never had to shoot down missiles before so I'm not sure if I can get them all.
"Great so now we have Bothans firing on us as well," Mara groaned. "Blast it, the plague ship is accelerating!"
"*Veila* get me that ship's approximate time to Bothawui," Mara asked aloud.
Twelve minutes and fifteen seconds if they maintain present speed and course.
"Plenty of time," Tahiri grumbled. "But I think the captain of that Yorik-vec escort cruiser realizes what I'm trying to do. He's maneuvered to keep his ship between us and the plague-ship."
"Can you open a comm-line to the Bothans?"
The Yuuzhan Vong yammosk is employing comm-jammer technology.
"How about to the Yorik-vec?" Tahiri asked.
At the same time, two Bothan vessels are equipped with Yammosk jammers. No communications are possible.
"Okay, I take it back , *this* is the worst case scenario," Mara grumbled, gripping the chair as their ship was rocked yet again. The rocking didn't stop, and they could hear the outer hull take several strong hits. "Who's firing on us now?"
"The Yorik-vec," Tahiri answered grimly. "*And* a Bothan Assault Crusier."
"*Veila*, switch flying over to manual. This might be your body, but I've quite a few more years of flying experience than you," Mara called out.
Over the cognition hood, the sentient ship responded. "*Switching to manual, take good care of me please.*"
The ship lurched into a death-defying spiral as it tried to avoid the incoming fire from the two larger vessels. Its singularity wards and shields were doing their best to soak up the deadly bolts of energy, but the *Veila* wasn't designed to be a warship.
Tahiri did her best to fire the weapons, but that only attracted another squadron of fighters. "You're taking us further away from the plagueship."
"Yeah, but if I kept us on our course we'd be space dust!"
"Woah!" The voice of Ben Skywalker let the two older women know that the children had entered the cockpit.
"This is some battle," Kani Asari breathed with a touch of fear.
"Get back to the main room and strap yourselves in!" Mara barked.
"Can't we help?" Ben asked.

"Do it!"
"Go on, Cassa," Tahiri said, straining to keep the panic out of the family meld. "Strap in."
Another powerful jolt and alarms began blaring.
"What does that mean?" Ben called out.
"It means we've lost our deflectors, now strap in!" Mara yelled.
Rather than go back to the main room, the children clambered into the passenger seats in the cockpit, with Kani pulling Cassa onto her lap and Cassa holding Jayce.
"Of course they do this when Leia isn't here. Your kids ever listen to you?" Mara huffed in annoyance.
"Must be a Skywalker thing," Tahiri shot back. "Never had any problems."
Plague ship approaching high orbit of Bothawui. Several shuttles were dispatched to the moons.
"What! We still have seven minutes!"
Plague ship performed a micro-jump and let the planet's gravity well pull it from its jump. It could not have felt good, and I am detecting no further dovin basal emissions. Seed pods have been released. The planet's gravity has pulled the ship from orbit. Plotting course... the ship will crash into the capital.
"Oh no," Tahiri whispered. They were still too far away, still had too many ships firing at them, to be able to do anything. The minutes seemed to pass infinitely slower, the thought of what was about to happen unfathomable. She had been at Bastion when the population was massacred and remembered that feeling with crystal clarity.
As that thought struck her, she immediately whipped her head around to her children and encompassed them in a protective bubble of Force energy. Mara, sensing Tahiri's actions, similarly cloaked Ben and Kani, her green eyes hardened.
A second later, a tidal wave of death echoed through the Force. And it wasn't a pleasant death either. It was intense pain, the type only a Yuuzhan Vong modified virus could inflict. The attackers of Zonama had spread biological weapons, so it was in kind that the Yuuzhan Vong were returning the favor.
"Force," Mara closed her eyes, straining to protect the children even as she felt the full brunt of the millions of deaths. Then millions more as the fast-acting retro-viruses began to run their course.
Silence filled the cockpit of the *Veila*, its occupants keenly aware of what had just occurred, even if the experience had been lessened for the younger ones. But they had little time to contemplate the situation.
"Mom! Look!" Ben yelled.

Mara turned her attention around and saw what Ben was pointing at. One of the Bothan ships had rammed a much larger Matalok. Ordinarily, such an attack would have been futile. But then the coral around the impact site began to blacken and crumble.
"Omega Blue!" Tahiri yelled. "*Veila,* stay clear! Master, get us out of here!"
Mara quickly sent the hybrid vessel into a sharp climb. The action caught the attention of another group of Bothan ships who climbed in sharp pursuit after them; which in turn drew the eyes of wrathful Yuuzhan Vong pilots and the two squadrons of coralskippers that followed.
"Take us to the Clustership," Tahiri called out.
"What? In the center of the Vong fleet?"
"Do it!" Tahiri snapped, her concentration focused on blasting the ships blasting at them. Using the *Veila*'s senses, she watched another Yuuzhan Vong capital ship succumb to the anti-Yuuzhan Vong virus. With Bothawui devastated, it looked like the gloves were coming off in a big way. "Something's off with it."
"She's right," Ben spoke up. "I thought Yuuzhan Vong weren't Force sensitive."
"They're not," Mara gritted her teeth.
"Well someone's on the Clustership, who's not Vong, but can use the Force," Ben said.
"That's great, honey," Mara said distractedly as a small explosion erupted out the back of their ship. "Tahiri, we're losing dovin-basal defenses. There's just too much incoming fire."
Then, another group of Yuuzhan Vong vessels maneuvered into position directly in front of the *Veila*. Rather than fire at the *Veila*, however, the fleet entered a formation more akin to a GA fleet formation.
"Help," Tahiri said with relief.
"You sure?"
"The formation, it's the Blessed Hand of Yun-Shuno," Tahiri answered. "It's an all Freed One auxiliary."
"Good, because I've just about run out of tricks."
The new fleet began firing on every ship pursuing the *Veila,* Bothan and Yuuzhan Vong. The sudden support threw the pursuers off-guard and many were shredded in seconds. The *Veila* managed to squirt free from the scrum, a little toasted, but still intact. The friendly Yuuzhan Vong forces formed an honor-guard around them, flying in concert with the *Veila*'s movements.

But just as the good news heartened them, another wave of death washed over the occupants of the *Veila*. Jayce began crying in earnest, Cassa whimpering in distress, and Ben and Kani quickly reaching out to grab each other's hands.
"What was that?" Ben said hoarsely.
"Oh Force," Kani gestured towards the side viewport with her free hand. "Look, the moons!"
The vision that greeted the Jedi was one that they couldn't immediately process. The shuttles that had come from the plagueship and landed on the moons had evidently contained dovin basals. Dovin basals which were being used to bring the moons down onto Bothawui. One had already collided, and the other two were well on course to follow.
"The Clustership is retreating." The *Veila* announced.
"Follow it," Tahiri barked, tears welling in her eyes as she tore her gaze from the battlefield. The Bothans and Yuuzhan Vong fleets were still going all out to kill each other, and it didn't look like they would stop until one side or the other was completely destroyed. The only ships staying out of the fight were the ones protecting the *Veila*.
"Jedi Solo?" Kani asked, confused. "Shouldn't we try to stop the fighting?"
"We can only save them if they want to be saved," Tahiri said hoarsely. "And they clearly don't want to be saved. All we can do now is discover just what in the vast desert of Tatooine happened."
-)[-IV-](-
When the *Veila* and its escort of friendly Yuuzhan Vong ships emerged from hyperspace once more they found themselves in a four-planet system, all of which were gas giants.
"I recognize this system," Mara said in a low voice.
"You do?"
"The Emperor had me conducting mop-up operations after Vader killed an information broker in this system," Mara pointed to a blue-green gas giant further in. "There are a string of asteroids that make up the ring of that planet One of them held the broker's base."
"'Held'?"
"As part of the mop up, I blew it up," Mara answered. "But there are still several similar sized asteroids out there."
"I don't like this," Tahiri murmured. "This is straight out of the Yuuzhan Vong war book."
"What is, mommy?" Cassa spoke up.

"A lone ship leaps out into an uninhabited system and flees into the asteroid belt," Ben spoke up, earning surprised looks from the adults. "What? I read."
"Only inside the asteroid belt are squadrons of yorik-et," Tahiri finished.
"*Receiving incoming transmission…he's overriding my controls! He's using the Force*!"
"What?!"
"*Why do you wait there, She-Who-Was-Shaped?*" A voice that was not quite human echoed over the ship's comm-system. "*Why do you not hunt us down?*"
"Who are you?" Tahiri frowned, wondering why the voice was familiar yet strange at the same time.
"*We were so easily forgotten*?"
"Are you a Joiner?"
"*Only the weak become Joiners*," the voice said with a sneer of disdain. "*We are weapons, but we are not droids. We are heretical, but we are pure, with the blood of gods running through our veins*. "
"Blood of…" Tahiri trailed off, her mind spinning. And then, she placed the voice, her face losing color as she did. "Slayers. [You still live?]"
"*We are the chosen of the divine goddess, of course we would live. Those who gave their lives annihilating the Bothan race exist at the sides of the gods now. Come to us so that we may slay one who is divine, just as you did when you helped slay Onimi*."
"Got them," Mara murmured. "They're hiding in the asteroid ring orbiting the third planet."
"Are we going to wait for backup?" Ben spoke. "No offense to the Yun-Shuno guys, but they have two beat-up picketships and a squad and a half of coralskippers."
"We can wait, but the Slayers won't," Tahiri answered grimly. Her Force presence flickered as she switched over to Vongsense, her eyes cooling considerably. "And your mom and I are more than a match for them. *Veila,* take us in."
"I thought you said this was a trap," Kani protested.
"It is," Tahiri said without emotion, her Vongsense stretched out towards their destination. "There are yorik-et in the planet's rings, and warriors on the Clustership."
"Don't forget the three blazing novae of dark side," Mara muttered.
"Plan?"
"The *Veila* will drop us off and then help the Hand of Yun-Shuno deal with the lackies outside. We get to deal with the genocidal madmen."
"Mommy?"

"It's okay, Cass. The *Veila* will keep you and Jayce safe. Ben and Kani too."
"At the speed the *Veila* is going, will she be able to pull up in time?" Mara said worriedly, the hybrid ship's engines pushed to the max and streaming dangerously towards the asteroids that ringed the planet.
"Well it's either an almost-crash into the Clustership or a definite fireball when those fighters start shooting at us. The last thing I want is to turn the Hand of Yun-Shuno into martyrs," Tahiri was unbuckling her harness. "We should probably head towards the ramp now."
"No kidding," Mara struggled to follow.
"Mom," Ben spoke up, trying to get out of his seat.
"Stay in the cockpit, Ben," Mara said tersely. "And no heroics. I'll be back shortly."
"Incoming fighters," Kani spoke up, gripping the arm-rests of her chair.
"Incoming Clustership," Cassa chimed in.
The adults hurried through their ship, literally sensing the distance fly by. Tahiri grabbed the vacuum ooglith and gnullith from its place by the main ramp and gestured for the older woman to do the same.
"Don't worry, these are loads better than spacesuits. Feels like a second skin."
"I'll take your word for it," Mara muttered, flinching slightly as the red membrane wrapped itself around her body. "There a reason why these Slayers chose to stay and reveal themselves? They could have gotten away if they tried."
"They're crazy?" Tahiri guessed. "Or either that they're going with the whole 'warrior' thing, thinking themselves invincible so they haven't even considered the notion we might win."
"*Drop off in ten-seconds,"* Kani announced over the intercom. The fact that she was able to do so meant that she had either slid into the pilot or co-pilot seat.
"*Coralskips will be on us in seven,*" Ben supplied.
"*Good luck mommy!*" Cassa added from a distance.
"*Veila,* you *are* flying, right?" Tahiri said with a groan. "They're using your cognition hoods, aren't they?"
"I'm giving the small people something to do," the Veila said with a hint of a pout. "You're lucky I'm such a smart ship you know."
"Would you stop using the neural feedback then? I don't need attitude from you too."
"I'm not. Analyzing the physio-psycho-development of most species, I am acting my age."
Any further argument was forestalled as the ship slammed into an unexpected halt. Outside its pursuers over-shot the hybrid vessel and

were rapidly swinging around to correct the error. At the same time, the Yun-Shuno escort squadron blasted at the attackers, allowing the *Veila* to continue towards the Clustership without incident. The fact that the Clustership hadn't fired any shots or tried evasive maneuvers made the challenge by the Slayers all the more clear.

Stepping out into the hangar-bay of the larger vessel, Tahiri and Mara both took a moment to look around. The thing that immediately caught their attention was the pile of bodies stacked up in one corner.

"The original crew?" Mara guessed.

"Probably," Tahiri said, studying one of the bodies. "Many of them aren't scarred. Former Shamed. *Veila*, go ahead and take off, we'll call you again when we're ready for pick up."

The hybrid vessel powered up and took off, heading for the scrum of Yuuzhan Vong vessels blasting away at each other.

"They were all killed by lightsaber," Mara said, rising from her kneeling position over another body.

"That's good and bad," Tahiri remarked. "A Clustership can have a crew of almost a thousand. Given that there are piles and piles of bodies, most of them are dead."

"Is that the good news or bad news?"

"Good," Tahiri said coolly. She met Mara's eyes. "The bad is that the warriors and shapers chosen to crew a Clustership are elite, even in these days. The crew of a yammosk-bearing vessel never cease their training, and because of their proximity to the yammosk have almost Force-like coordination."

"That's bad?"

"Yes," Tahiri said. "That means the three Slayers we're feeling onboard killed almost the entire crew despite that."

Mara grimaced. "Great. You said almost the entire crew, who's left?"

Tahiri's Force presence shifted for a second. "Can't do exact numbers. More than a handful, less than a room full? Probably warriors who bought into whatever the Slayers were selling. For most of the warrior caste, they put great weight on their commanding officer. You kill that one, you prove you are stronger, smarter, and so on. I wonder if Yuuzhan Vong can even be corrupted by the dark side. It's not like…"

"Tahiri, focus."

Tahiri released another breath and shifted back to her regular presence. "Focusing. They're all on the bridge by the way. No one in the hallways. The yammosk is also dead, so not sure how their allies outside are staying coordinated."

"How are *our* allies remaining focused? They're all Yuuzhan Vong too," Mara asked curiously, following Tahiri out of the hangar.

"Oh, Anakin installed a device on the *Veila* that mimics the grav-pulses a yammosk produces," Tahiri said, like reverse engineering one of the most advanced biots in the Yuuzhan Vong arsenal was an every day thing. "Same idea as a yammosk-jammer, but he did something that converts the jamming waves into impulses the shipboard brains can understand. He and a few of his shaper buddies worked on it one weekend out of sheer boredom."
"Uh huh," Mara said dryly.
"What?" Tahiri said, looking at the older woman self-consciously.
Mara just grinned. "Nothing, it's nice to know that some things about that nephew of mine haven't changed."
At that, Tahiri fell uncharacteristically silent, reflexively trying to reach across the galaxy to her childhood best friend. "He's such a dummy. You want to know the worst part though?"
"What?" Mara sighed, sensing the emotions bubbling beneath the surface of the blond woman.
"He's a dummy, but he's right. It doesn't matter that I just left him in the far corner of the galaxy battling against odds no one can win against. Our kids needed me, the Yuuzhan Vong needed me…I guess some part of me never got over nearly losing him in the war. I mean, I came back, but what did I really change? The Yuuzhan Vong and Bothans are now killing each other to the last man, I haven't been spending enough time with Jayce and Cassa, and the galaxy is hardly any better off."
Letting Tahiri vent, Mara made a noncommittal sound. She briefly watched the pulsating veins that lined the walls of the corridor. She had never really grown accustomed to Yuuzhan Vong biots. Even if Tahiri was culturally half-Yuuzhan Vong, the Yuuzhan Vong had been responsible for the genocide of several sentient races and had left the galaxy in a state in might never recover from. Add to the fact that Mara had almost died from a poisoning during the war, and she couldn't help but feel a bit put off by the living walls around her. It was one thing to know that the Yuuzhan Vong ships were living beings, but quite another to be walking through hallways that breathed and had a pulse.
"There is a bright side in all of this," Mara said gently, after Tahiri ran out of steam.
"Really?"
"The fact that the galaxy is currently focusing on the election means that the war between the Bothans and Yuuzhan Vong will practically go unnoticed for now. The Bothans made no friends seceding from the GA, and the Yuuzhan Vong won't be anyone's favorite any time soon. As

long as they keep the conflict local, no one will actually care enough to raise a stink."
"That's the bright side?" Tahiri said wryly.
"The alternative is the two of them dragging every regional power into a pointless war that no one will win," Mara answered back.
"Good point," Tahiri groaned. "I really need to boink these Slayers over the head. They have to know that what they're doing will hurt the Yuuzhan Vong in the long run, so why in the Twin Suns did they do it?"
"We can ask them when we see them."
The organic lift slowed to a halt at the bridge of the Clustership, and the two Jedi stepped out, lightsaber flying to hand.
Waiting for them in the shadows of the dimly lit control room were the three Slayers, and nearly a dozen warriors.
"You guys mastered VongForce too, huh," Tahiri noted evenly to the Slayers in the background. The hulking warriors all looked at her with yellow and red irised eyes, fanning out to entrap the Jedi in a semi-circle. "And I guess that answers my question about whether or not the Yuuzhan Vong can be affected by the Force."
The sizzling noise of Tahiri and Mara's lightsabers activating was accompanied by the white and purple lights their respective blades cast on the bridge.
The lead Slayer stepped forward, one arm replaced by a radank claw, his sickly gray skin glimmering in the light of the lightsaber.
"You have come," he said without emotion.
"You're still alive," Tahiri noted, recognizing the one she had 'disarmed' during the war.
"Indeed," the Slayer's blood-shot eyes glinted with steel.
"How many Slayers survived the war?" Tahiri said in a low voice.
"Enough," the Slayer answered tonelessly. "The qhasa with our template survived as well."
Tahiri closed her eyes, cursing silently. It didn't matter how many Slayers survived because the qhasa was as good as a cloning blueprint. "The war is over, Slayer. You no longer have a purpose."
"Oh, but we do. And we are all the stronger for what you did, for revealing to us that we were truly puppets to Nom Anor. But puppets no longer. When we last met, I was but a babe, a learner in a galaxy we were only but a part of. Now I and my brothers are the masters of the Jedi arts, are masters of our fate."
"Yay for you," Tahiri said flatly. "All that knowledge and power and you use it to start a war that will doom two races. What a waste."
They Slayer's mouth twisted into a sneer. "I do not need your approval. When you die here and now, you will see who the gods truly side with."

Tahiri just raised an eyebrow, her hands gripping her saber in a two-handed grip as she felt the Slayer issue a command to the warriors through VongForce.
"Any ideas?" Mara said in a low voice, standing back to back with the smaller woman.
"Remember during the war, the creatures we saw on Kalee?"
"Yes?"
"Same idea. These may have been elite warriors," Tahiri gestured to those surrounding them. "But now they're only puppets."
"They're still armed and dangerous."
"Only if you let them stab you," Tahiri said glibly. "Cut the puppet masters and the puppets fall too."
"You're right. Too much of my nephew has rubbed off on you," Mara muttered back. She likewise felt the plan in Tahiri's mind and focused her attention on the trio of Slayers.
The warriors attacked on some unseen signal, rushing the two women with no care for their own lives.
Immediately Tahiri and Mara whirled away from each other and into the attackers, sabers hissing and flashing as they raked across amphistaff and vonduun crab armor. Tahiri thrust her hand out and through VongForce knocked several warriors off their feet. In the meantime, Mara vaulted through the gap and made a beeline for the Slayers. In the limited space of the bridge, even if there were more warriors than Tahiri, the lithe Jedi was more than capable of keeping the others at bay.
Amphistaff and coufee slashed at her, but Tahiri leaped back over a control console and the weapons cut through nothing but air. Another amphistaff lashed out, but Tahiri caught it with a bare hand, ignoring the pain from the rough scales cutting her flesh and concentrating instead on the warrior holding the weapon. With a jerk of her head, the warrior was staggered, releasing his grip on the weapon. Tahiri whirled the weapon into its staff-form, and dispatched the warrior with a slice of her lightsaber. The death of the warrior seemed to embolden the others, and they approached the small woman with murderous gleams in their eyes. Unaffected, Tahirir assumed the double-style weapon technique she had developed in the war and gestured with her weapons for them to attack.
They obliged in a flurry of furious motion, slashing, chopping, destroying the control clusters that littered the bridge without any regard for their supposedly sacred nature. Tahiri continued to whirl and spin, her weapons batting aside the few close calls as she met the warriors' attack with an offensive of her own. She knew she couldn't

last forever against their powerful figures, but she needed to keep their attention on her and not on Mara. An amphistaff whipped across her cheek, cutting a bloody gash. A coufee sliced deeply into one arm, its poisons quickly making it go numb and the amphistaff to fall from her hand. The blonde Jedi feinted being more injured than she actually was, drawing in six of the warriors towards her. Her back touched the wall of the bridge, and she smirked. Calling on her dual Jedi-Vong nature to pin her to the ground, she swept her lightsaber behind her just as the six warriors began to charge. The resulting hull breach immediately blew the six warriors out into the void of space.

The remaining warriors, who had been in the process of abandoning her to aid the Slayers, immediately turned back. The ship mended the breach, restoring atmosphere to the bridge. Now Tahiri had five very angry, brainwashed warriors to deal with.

"How's it going over there?" Tahiri called out, pulling a Yuuzhan Vong bandage from her utility belt and slapping it over one of her wounds, hissing as the bandage's teeth dug in.

"Just lovely," Mara yelled from the opposite side of the bridge. Her purple lightsaber seemed to be flashing non-stop as she engaged the three lightsaber-wielding Slayers. The trio were working with impeccable timing and skill, having obviously honed their abilities since the war. Even the former Hand of the Emperor was having a hard time keeping the three at bay, let alone launch an offensive of her own.

Eyeing the warriors, Tahiri made a choice. "Master, catch!"

Mara grabbed Tahiri's lightsaber in mid-air, its yellow-white light immediately flaring as it blocked another purple blade. "Thanks! What about you?"

Tahiri kicked up an amphistaff into her functional hand. Her eyes cool as she turned the pain of her wounds into strength. Snapping the weapon into whip-mode, she smiled at Mara's back. "I'll be just fine."

Her body, fueled by the pain, seemed to blur as she charged the nearest warrior head on. Though the warrior's reflexes were among the best, he was still a second behind the speed Tahiri was using. Her amphistaff whipped out and decapitated the warrior with a thunder-clap. Another warrior tried to stab the Jedi, but Tahiri spun around, turned her amphistaff into staff-mode, and drove it into the warrior's face. The other warriors attacked. She abandoned her amphistaff and instead pulled free the coufee from the dying warrior's belt. Tahiri hurled the living blade into the neck of another warrior, even as the other two pierced each of her thighs with their amphistaffs. Again transforming the pain into potential, Tahiri thrust her now empty hands

out and literally rocketed herself off the impaling weapons. The blood quickly began soaking her tunic and she knew she had little time left before blood-loss made things difficult.
Fortunately, both warriors crumpled as if an invisible hand had bashed them over the head.
"Hey, I had them!" Tahiri chirped over to Mara. She turned her head and saw that the older woman had simultaneously dispatched two of the Slayers with pinpoint stabs to the chest.
"Right," Mara called back. "Sorry. Now do you mind patching yourself up, you're bleeding all over the deck."
Suddenly Mara was sent flying across the bridge by a sledgehammer-like force, the sound of her ribcage buckling reverberating throughout the bridge. Mara came to a stop next to Tahiri, coughing out blood as she did.
"Hi," Tahiri deadpanned. "Nice of you to drop by."
"Shut up," Mara muttered grumpily. "Here, take your lightsaber back, Vong Girl."
The radank-armed Slayer took his time to cross the bridge, looking extremely not-happy. Weakly, the two women pushed themselves up to their feet.
"Why?" Tahiri asked, spitting out blood tinged black by the amphistaff venom. "What was the point of pitting the two races against each other?"
"The Yuuzhan Vong created us," the Slayer said evenly. The Force radiated out from him in a twisted cloud of darkness. He held out a hand, and the ship's controls were crushed by an invisible fist. At the same time, the ship began to speed up again, turning towards the gas giant. "Created us for war. We are no longer droids, but we are still weapons. Just as the Jedi are, just as the Yuuzhan Vong wanted us to be. Now they feel what it is like to be impaled by the blade they created."
"Revenge?" Mara said in disbelief. "I don't buy it."
"It is not my care whether you believe my words or not," the Slayer held out his hand again and one of his fallen comrade's lightsaber flew into his free hand. "You only have to die here. Die now. Just as our Master desires."
Tahiri felt a chill at those words. "And who did you find worthy enough to teach you?"
"Enough talk," the Slayer shook his head. Then, just as Tahiri had only moments earlier, became a blur of motion, his strength powered by his anger and resolve.

Tahiri and Mara barely got their sabers up in time, the impact of the Slayer against their weapons sending them both tumbling backwards. The Slayer pounced, but the women rolled out of the way and sprung up on opposite sides of the shaped creature.
"[This is pointless!]" Tahiri yelled in Yuuzhan Vong. "[No matter what reason, why are you wasting the life the gods gave you!]"
"You see it as wasting," the Slayer sent a burst of Force energy to Mara that threw her to the other side of the bridge, and charged at Tahiri. Both his purple blades slammed onto Tahiri's yellow-white in an explosive hiss. "I see it as fulfilling their will. It is they who have imbued me and my brethren with their power. They who enabled us to survive when Shimrra and the great Onimi perished. My master didn't want us to meet, wanted to see you die personally. But when I see my master again, I will regale in great detail what it was like to watch the life leave your eyes."
Tahiri snarled, the poisons circulating through her body weakening her muscles despite the Force's reinforcements. With a spittle-filled hiss, defiantly keeping his blades at bay, she shook her head. "That is not going to happen today."
The Slayer pushed off as a blast of lightning raked the air he had been occupying. Mara, her lightsaber clipped back to her belt, glared with hatred at the Slayer. Her fingers were crackling with green lightning and her red hair fluttered in an invisible breeze. "Back off."
"You touch the power of Yun-Lingni too?" The Slayer seemed mildly impressed.
"Stay still and find out," Mara growled back.
The Slayer grinned a crooked grin. "A Skywalker walking with Yun-Lingni, will the hypocrisy of the *Jeedai* Order never cease?"
"That's not the dark side," Tahiri chuckled, looking at the Slayer with pity. "Reach out with the Force, Slayer. She looks at you with hatred, but that is not what gives her strength."
The Slayer's grin became frozen as he did what Tahiri told him to. "But…"
"The dark side is many things," Mara said evenly, the Force swirling around her in a magnitude much stronger than the Slayer's own impressive localized windstorm. "But all powerful isn't one of them. The light side's main strength is empathy, understanding. That's something your dark master will never be able to teach you."
The Slayer snarled and took off like a bullet, his dark aura slicing into Mara's. Tahiri made no effort to stop him, instead pumping all of her remaining strength through her bond with Mara. The Force exploded

into a violent maelstrom, bathing the bridge in a golden orange light that engulfed the purple-black that the Slayer was emitting.
Mara just shook her head at the Slayer, both her hands stretched outwards. Powered by Tahiri's understanding of the Yuuzhan Vong psyche, the Force pulsated into the charging Slayer, slowing him down slowly but surely. "For someone who has known only hate and death since being born, it is time you learned compassion and mercy. Feel the true power of the Force, the dark *and* the light."
The Slayer roared, but fast became aware that his entire body was beginning to break down. He paused a few meters from Mara, realizing that his arms had fallen away at the shoulder, his original arm dissolved into ash while the randank claw flopped about on the ground without purpose. He looked up, startled.
"Wha…"
The Force erupted outwards, the light side surging through his twisted body and freeing the remnants of the dozens of Jedi that made up his genetic code. He let out a silent scream, his every pore shining with bright light for a split second before the Force reclaimed what belonged to it. The silent implosion reduced the rest of the Slayer to a fine pile of dust, and the bridge completely devoid of his presence.
"Nice," Tahiri breathed, her breath shallow and weak.
Mara rolled her eyes and helped the young woman to her feet. "Really, you and Anakin can't go anywhere without obtaining some form of life-threatening injury can you?"
Tahiri nodded, the toxins from the amphistaff and coufee wounds making even that motion painful. She clenched Mara's arm. "We have to get off the ship. The Slayer sent it into the gas giant."
The ship bucked violently.
"We're still too far away to feel its affects," Tahiri muttered, slightly delirious.
Just then the villip choir inverted. "*Mom! Mom, are you there?*"
"Ben?" Mara blinked at the image of her oldest in villip-form. "What in…I told you to stay in the cockpit!"
"*We are! The Veila blasted a hole into the hangar bay and is insisting we get the two of you out fast. At the speed we're going, she calculated something like five minutes before the ship reaches crush depth.*"
"We're on our way," Mara grumbled.
"Ben, in the meantime have the *Veila* plot a course back to Bothawui," Tahiri exhaled slowly. "We still have a mess to clean up there."
"Leave that to others," Mara scolded the younger Jedi. "You try to do any more and I'll knock you out myself."

"Yes, master," Tahiri chuckled feebly, then groaned and leaned heavily into the red-haired woman. "I've forgotten how much amphistaff venom burns.
"Go do your swimming in pain thing," Mara said.
"Did already, burned out."
Mara looked at Tahiri worriedly and tried to inject humor into their conversation. "Hey, you were the one fighting zombie-Vong. I had three fully trained, skilled Force-users with lightsabers to battle."
Tahiri nodded once more, then her eyes rolled back and she lost consciousness.
-)[-V-](-
While Tahiri was dragged aboard the *Veila*, and its crew took off from the doomed Clustership, the events on Bothawui had made its way all the way to Denon.
The Senate was clambering loudly for the new Chief of State to show his authority, to do *something*, to bring peace back to the area. Never mind that the Bothans were no longer a part of the GA, that no one expected him to actually help the Yuuzhan Vong, or that most of their military forces was tied up elsewhere. Kenth Hamner, for better or worse, was now the leader of the largest galactic government and people were looking to him for answers.
"In light of the information that they used biological weapons, I propose we implement sanctions on both the Bothan Trade Alliance and the New Yuuzhan Vong," Outer Rim Senator Nav Ekhat said, her platform rotating at the forefront of all the others.
"I object," the Yuuzhan Vong representative protested. "The Bothans were the aggressors, launched a gene-tailored viral attack on our homeworld. When Cal Omas and his administration did nothing, we responded in kind. Given how the Yuuzhan Vong are a member of this galactic government, I demand that it help the Yuuzhan Vong bring the Bothans to heel."
"The Bothans may not be a part of the Galactic Alliance, but the Bothan Trade Alliance is tied financially to many GA allies and projects," the Manda sector senator protested. Since the secession of the Bothans, the Manda sector had been their advocate in the senate. "Those are credits, we're talking about lives!"
"Order," Kenth Hamner barked harshly, banging the gavel once. The Force assisted his words and made the Senate fall quiet. "I know that all of you feel something towards this issue, whether it is support for one side or another, or ambivalence. We have all seen the reports and it is undeniable that biological weapons have been used. I now move to have the Jedi Order send peacekeepers to mitigate this situation in a

neutral manner while this Senate drafts a proposal that bans any further use of biological-based weaponry. We cannot undo what has been done, nor bring back to life those that have died. But what we can do is prevent instances like this from happening again. I will leave it up to Grandmaster Luke Skywalker to choose the team, as he knows the Jedi best and can no doubt solve this matter in satisfactory way. While they stop the fighting, it will be up to us in the Senate to ensure that it does not happen again."
"And what of Bothawui's punishment?" The Yuuzhan Vong Senator protested.
"Your forces have decimated their homeworld, crashed the moons down onto it. I think that is punishment enough," Kenth said smoothly. "The question that should be asked is who will take up the slack? With the Bothan Trade Alliance dangling in the balance, the void must be filled before the chaos is felt throughout the region."
A platform moved forward. "Chief of State."
"The Senate recognizes the delegation from the Imperial Remnant."
"Thank you," the Imperial bowed his head. "The Empire is more than equipped to assume responsibilities and maintain the trade-network set up by the Bothans."
Another platform hovered up and Kenth tilted his head towards the owners. "Representatives from the Bakuran Hegemony?"
"I would like to remind the delegates of the Galactic Alliance that Bothan space is no longer under Galactic Alliance control," the Bakuran ambassador spoke. He was flanked by a P'w'eck and two other Bakurans, an older gentleman and a younger man in senatorial robes. "As such, any attempt by a Galactic Alliance member to annex any portion of it would be considered an act of aggression. The Bakuran Hegemony already owns trading groups operating under the Bothan Trade Alliance and consider this our sphere of influence. If the Bothans become incapable of maintaining the network, then it is we, one of their largest trading partners, who will assume control."
"Thank you for the reminder, Ambassador," Kenth said as the Imperial delegation bowed respectfully and brought their platform back. Inwardly, however, Kenth fumed. The Bakurans were no longer a part of the Galactic Alliance, but were also too big to leave out of the galactic political picture. It wasn't like he could just dismiss them, but he couldn't pander to their needs too. "Please note, Ambassador, that the Galactic Alliance likewise has many business ties to the Bothan Trade Network and will also defend them from any form of annexation."

"Of course, Chief of State, thank you for letting the People of Bakura say their piece." Their platform hovered back.
Kenth forced a smile, the Bothans and Yuuzhan Vong no longer a concern in his mind. He was sure that the Jedi Order was more than capable of solving that minor squabble before it blew up into something bigger. Even if the Solos were away saving the galaxy, there were still plenty of other galaxy-recognized Jedi names to do the job. "And onto the next order of business…"
The business of the thousands of systems in the alliance continued as usual, their own needs and problems taking precedent. After all, the Unknown Regions, the Bothawui sector, they were all so far away from the Core, concerned people that could easily be replaced. Such was the attitude of the Senate as it started down a road it would never recover from.
-)[-Chapter End-](-

Unknown Regions
-)[-I-](-
For better or worse, the battle in orbit above Ilum was winding down. Both sides had expended all of their warheads a month earlier and were reduced to laserfire and suicidal collisions. Both sides were also keenly feeling the effects of the war of attrition they had been waging. The Killiks had only small supporting craft left—light cruisers, frigates, picketships, and an occasional squadron of dartfighters. The Galactic Alliance force was in a similar state, with most of its Star Destroyers and Battle Dragons out of commission. If one bothered to count, there were probably more ships and remains of ships on the planet's surface than in orbit.
"Killiks are massing again," Tenel Ka heard the comm-operator announce. She was in her Battle Dragon, one of a handful still operational, but very banged up. "Looks like they have their sights set on us."
"Fall back and keep the moon between us and the Killiks. We will pick them off as they rear their heads."
"Wait, they're falling back."
Tenel Ka frowned and walked over to the sensor station of her relatively crispy bridge. "They are breaking orbit."
"That's what it looks like, *Chume*."
"Get me Admiral Durron and the other admirals," Tenel Ka said to the comm-operator.

The image of the Outer Rim Security Commander appeared and the three others commanding the allied fleet appeared. Kadra exhaled slowly. "*So I'm not imagining it.*"
"Unless we are all hallucinating," Tenel Ka confirmed.
"*Did we actually win*?" Ducha Aleson Grey asked in disbelief.
Tenel Ka exhaled slowly, closing her eyes and reaching out with the Force. Unfortunately the dark side and all the death made things hazy. Very slowly though, she began to shake her head. "The Killiks are up to something."
"*Aren't they always*?" Kadra sighed, half her face covered in a bacta bandage. She was commanding her portion of the fleet from a blockade runner. Her flagship had gone out in a blaze of glory earlier in the month, or at least that's what the Corellian-raised woman wanted to remember.
One of the reasons why the odds were so favorable to the GA forces was because the Killiks were willing to ram a cruiser with a hundred starfighters to blow it up in a spectacular fashion. Bres-Durron's Mon Cal had suffered a similar fate, being cored from engine to bridge by what seemed like a never-ending stream of dartfighters. The effect had demoralized Kadra's fleet group and had almost been routed if not for the Jedi quickly filling in for the Battle-Meld coordinator who had been killed in the attack.
"The Killiks are holding three-point-one-four lightminutes between Ilum and Trop," the operator called out, referring to the fourth and fifth planets of the system.
"Reform the fleet," Tenel Ka said calmly. Even then, she could feel the danger in the Force spiking to alarming levels. She kept casting her senses outwards, straining her eyes to see anything that might warrant such caution. All she saw was the vast emptiness of space and the mocking coldness of the dark side. "Admirals, your fleet groups are worse off than Our own, please assemble them behind ours."
"*We'll take point,*" Jedi Knight Doran Sarkin-Tainer said evenly. "*The Mando Keldabe cruisers have held up as well. We might only be five in number, but we can be the tip to your saber*."
"Appreciated," Tenel Ka acknowledged the younger Jedi.
"*Are we going on the offensive*?" Admiral Genna Delpin of the Corellian contingent asked.
"Not at the moment," Tenel Ka shook her head. "Have our fighter squadrons bombard Killik ground positions. We do not know what the Killiks have planned or how long a reprieve they will give us, but will take full advantage of it."

Only a few minutes later, when the vast bulk of their fighter force had begun surface bombardments, alarms began chirping all across the bridge. Someone else had just entered the system.
"*Well, there goes the reprieve*," Doran muttered. He glanced out of the holo-cam range and barked out several orders in Mandalorian.
"*Okay, now I know I'm hallucinating*," Kadra breathed, likewise looking at a screen in front of her. "*Or did the sensors malfunction and report a fleet of a half-dozen asteroids dropping out of hyperspace*?"
Tenel Ka, however, paled. It wasn't the asteroids that intimidated her. The Force was now screaming its warning on all channels and filling her body with a dread she didn't know was possible. In fact, the entire bridge of her ship appeared to lose all resolve, with some fainting outright. The alarms continued and Tenel Ka desperately tried to clear her head.
"Incoming missiles!" A tech called out in despair. "Hundreds of them!"
Tenel Ka wanted to move, but unbeatable fear was keeping her rooted in place. She wanted to order evasive maneuvers, countermeasures, anything, but she was suddenly afraid to utter even a single word. Her hand was shaking at her side, the entire bridge of her ship silent save for the automated alarms. Everything seemed to move in extra slow motion as the Queen Mother of sixty-three systems began to hyperventilate.
She breathed out a single word, almost as if it summoned every single demon she had tried to lock away. "Welk."
And then the missiles struck.
The massive explosions broke whatever spell had fallen over them. But by then it was far too late to do anything about it. Whole pieces of the Battle Dragon were vanishing in violent balls of fiery light, the pride and joy of the Hapan Navy pinballing back and forth between one explosion after another.
And it wasn't just the Hapans getting a pounding. The hundreds of warheads continued to bombard the battered defenders, tearing apart damaged ships and opening new holes in others. Everything from GA cruisers down to their fighters were suddenly awash in flame. Those too damaged to power their engines pitched downwards, caught in Ilum's gravitational pull.
Her world spinning as the *Dragon Queen* began a death dive into the planet's upper atmosphere,Tenel Ka tried to pick herself up off the debris-strewn deck, but a sharp pain shooting through both her legs let her know that they were broken. She coughed violently, globs of blood landing on the metal beam that had fallen on her. Lifting her head she could see the whole front portion of her ship engulfed in a white-hot

blaze as its angle of descent became much too sharp. The spinning momentum of what was left of her doomed ship, flipped her around in a dizzying display. A hailstorm of debris flipped with her and trapped her up to the ceiling of the bridge, causing her to cry out in agony. The fact that her voice was the only one that did so sunk in a split second later. Casting a tear-filled gaze across the shattered command room, she could see the limp bodies of the rest of the crew. Just outside the viewport, the snowy white ground of Ilum shrunk in distance.

And then her ship flipped around again, Tenel Ka helpless against the power of momentum and gravity blacked out from the sheer pain that wracked her body.

Seconds later, the remains of the *Dragon Queen* became one of dozens of other meteors slamming into Ilum's surface.

-)[-II-](-

"Brace for impact!"

Jagged Fel was pitched over the console he had been standing at, landing painfully as the *Eternal Dynast* collided with a very large spitcrete cruiser. The meeting of metal against the diamond-like glass material that was the Killik spitcrete caused both vessels to shudder violently. The *Eternal Dynast*, already heavily damaged from months of skirmishing, had the worst of the impact. Like an Ewok pitched into and bouncing off the side of an ATAT, the mortally damaged Chiss Star Destroyer spun away from the impact leaving a trail of debris in its wake.

On the bright side, they had avoided the definitely lethal barrage of missiles and lasers that the other giant spitcrete cruiser had fired at them. The rest of the taskforce, made up of Jagged's surviving ship and General Antilles's own war-worn vessels, continued their maneuvers in a futile attempt to postpone their demise.

The box-like *Eternal Dynast* ceased spinning, becoming a drifting wreck in the middle of the nebula.

"Sir," a bloodied Antalia Draco quickly helped Jagged back to his feet. Jagged, grimacing as he gingerly put his weight on his foot. "I'm okay, Flight Officer."

"Sorry I couldn't help us avoid that," Antalia whispered hoarsely, her young features haunted.

"You'll do better next time," Jagged said reassuringly. His gaze darted to the rest of his bridge-crew. "Status?"

"Engines out, power's out. We're running on emergency life-support," came the response.

The ship shuddered.

"And we're in a tractor beam."
Jagged grimaced and limped over to a console that hadn't been blown out. "Good, the armory below deck is still intact."
"Sir?"
"If the Killiks want us alive, I do not intend to make it easy for them. Everyone who can carry a blaster, arm yourselves now. The only reason why they do not finish us off is because they want us to be Joined."
The others looked haunted, but they nodded in understanding.
Jagged pivoted and headed for the nearest ladder-way to the next deck, his mind already awhirl with possible ways to survive the boarding. Even then, he knew that this was probably his last mission. All out of tricks, both Wedge and himself had decided to face the Killik threat and reduce it as much as they possibly could. Using the Chiss-made hyperspace collapser, they had decimated the few-hundred capital ship strong Killik force by collapsing the lane with them inside it. The capital ships and support vessels that survived weren't happy at all.
Few hundred reduced to a little over a dozen and a half thanks to the combined brainstorm of the Antilles-Fel family.
But both Wedge and Jagged had run out of tricks after and what was left of their starfighter force was now fleeing back to allied lines. What had started out as a force of several thousand pilots from every reach of the galaxy, and eight capital ships shared between Wedge and Jagged, was now a few hundred pilots and a handful of support ships. Wedge's own command ship had been blasted apart, having likewise been badly battered through the months, reducing the Corellians' second dreadnaught to little more than a floating debris field.
"Sir," Antalia edged up to him, her Imperial façade non-existent as the situation finally sunk in. She was only sixteen after all, and was now about to face the choice of losing herself to the Joining or dying.
"We're not out of the fight yet," Jagged said evenly. "We'll get through this."
"Can't lie to a Jedi, sir," Antalia whispered, brown eyes watery and visible even in the red emergency lighting of the hallway. "There's thousands of bugs outside. A Force-sensitive Joiner commanding them, and…well…It's been an honor surv…"
Jagged raised an eyebrow at her, and she fell silent. "I do not lie, Flight Officer. It would serve no purpose."
"To boost morale?"

"Without a doubt, we will survive this day and you will see your home again," Jagged said without emotion. "Has your morale been boosted yet?"
Antalia let out a sniffling giggle and shook her head.
"See, no point in lying," Jagged slid his keycard across an access panel, then frowned when the door refused to budge.
Antalia's lightsaber helped convince the door to open. "But sir…"
"We'll get through this," Jagged repeated, stepping through the hole. "Jaina Solo would be most displeased with me if this was to be my last day or were I to get Joined."
"A good reason to survive, she scares me sometimes too," Antalia nodded.
"She does?"
"Of course," Antalia breathed. "She's *Jaina Solo*! Sword of the Jedi, Slayer of the Vong Overlord, defeater of the Black Sun and countless other pieces of filth. When she became Sivan and mine's master, it was like…I don't know…like having a god acknowledge your existence. Even if she's supposed to be a lightsider, you can tell once you get to know her that there is nothing she won't do for her friends and family. That failure is never an option if the fate of everything you care about is at stake."
"And you and your brother are her first students," Jagged said, his voice kept calm as he tried to reassure his protector. In the months battling at her side, he had almost come to view her as another little sister. "You've made her so very proud, and I know she would be amazed at all you and the others have done these past few months. But now is your first real test, Flight Officer. Can you stare death in the face, feel the calling of the Force, and tell it 'thanks but no thanks?'"
"Is that an order, sir?" Antalia straightened as best she could, her gaze never leaving his face.
"Naturally," Jagged said smoothly. "As you are an Imperial Jedi, trained by the best, I would expect nothing less."
Swallowing, Antalia breathed in and out real slow, finding her center in the Force. When she opened her eyes again, all traces of nervousness was gone. "Just relaying your order to the Force, sir."
"Efficient as ever," Jagged nodded, patting her on the shoulder. He looked to the others as they picked up a weapon and assembled in the hallway. There were barely a hundred in number, all wearing breathmasks and ballistic armor. The few stormtroopers left alive were in full regalia, looking ready to take on entire armies by themselves. Jagged looked at each one of them and then saluted sharply. "Fight well, for the Empire."

"For the Empire," they saluted him in turn.
With most of the ship no longer attached, and most holes melted slag, the entry points for the Killiks were actually quite few. The closest viable location was the airlock in the corridor just outside the ship's bridge. They took up positions along the soot and debris-riddled hallway, scorched walls and dim red lights adding to the solemn mood. They felt the ship shudder once more as the docking arm grabbed a hold of it, heard the metallic clanking as the arm retracted to pull the remnants of their ship into the hold of the Killik vessel. And then, for several long moments, all was quiet.
Sparks suddenly began to fly along the edges of the airlock door, and the defenders quickly refocused, staring down the barrel of their blasters and seemingly holding their breaths. A few seconds later, the door exploded inwards, clattering against the deck in a bent wreck. The insectoid sounds of the Killiks sounded shortly after, the shadows of theirs soldiers appearing in the smoking entryway. The defenders immediately opened fire, dropping the first few figures through the door. More surged through, Joiners and Killiks, releasing volleys of their own. And the short distance between the airlock and the rest of the hallway became thick with smoke and blasterfire. Bodies on both sides were falling, but the Killiks were definitely on the losing end.
Jagged's blaster rifle continued to join the others in laying out anything that tried to walk or crawl through the door. A mound of bodies was beginning to develop, the Killik's superior numbers no use against the chokepoint. Several stun grenades flew through the opening and in the middle of the defenders. Before they went off, however, Antalia gestured and sent them flying back the way they came. The bright flashes of light just outside the airlock revealed a literal wall of Killik soldiers and Joiners waiting to enter. The same flashes also dazed said wall.
"Let them have it," Jagged ordered, advancing with some of the others, firing from the hip into the airlock.
Several of the stormtroopers onboard likewise hurled grenades, but of the more lethal design. Emboldened by the sight of Killiks and Joiners being pushed back and decimated, the survivors of the *Eternal Dynast* actually began pushing their way out of their ship.
The Killik hangar bay defied all logical construction. Given that dartfighters attached to the outside of spitrete vessels, the cruiser didn't actually *need* a hangar bay. The room was a large cavity constructed within the spitcrete cruiser, a lone, several-speeder-wide walkway extended out from the bowels of the ship. More importantly, however, were the two large gun emplacements on either side of the

ship. The moment the defenders gained the momentum, the turbolaser cannons began firing with ear-splitting screeches.
The survivors hurried to get away from their ship, pushing into the mass of Killiks and Joiners with desperation. Many were grabbing the bodies of fallen foes to use as shields as they advanced into the storm of enemy fire.
The rest of the *Eternal Dynast* disappeared in a blaze of fire.
"Sir, we're not going to last long out here in the open, permission to do something stupid," Antalia yelled out to Jagged.
"So long as you remain among the living, granted," Jagged shouted back.
Antalia pulled out her grappling line from the stormtrooper utility belt at her side and fired it off at the ceiling of the room. The line pulled her up and out of the fighting, leaving the others to bunker down the best they could. Then, to everyone's surprise, the Killiks began pulling back.
"What's happening?" One of the survivors whispered. There was the sound of heavy machinery, and people's ears began popping.
"They're venting the hangar," Jagged said grimly.
Then, a large piece of the spitcrete ceiling fell away. Their eyes all turned skyward and they saw Antalia gesturing frantically to them next to the hole she had made. "Grappling lines, get up here!"
The surviving members of the *Eternal Dynast* hurriedly did as order, even as the doors to the hangar bay began to slide shut. Metal cables shot up into the ceiling next to Antalia in a frantic scramble. Just as the survivors began to ascend, the forcefield protecting the hangar from the void of space deactivated. There was a loud rushing sound, almost like a sonic boom as the air was sucked out of the hangar all at once. Debris, bodies, and anything that wasn't anchored were blown right out into space as well. The sudden pull also put a strain on the micro-motors within the grappling-sets, designed only for the weight of one or two individuals and not the depressurization of space. Several hooks lost their purchase, and the unfortunate crewmembers were sucked out right along with everything else. Some lines were sheared apart by the explosive decommission and flying debris, leading to more casualties.
Jagged, who had been among the last to activate his grappling set, was buffeted by the negative pressure, his body being painfully twisted and bounced around. He could almost hear the motor in his utility belt strain to keep up, but all he could do was hang on for dear life. But then, a piece of the *Eternal Dynast* that had embedded itself in the hangar wall when the ship exploded, was jarred loose. Jagged saw it come spinning towards him as if it was in slow motion. Letting his eyes

fall close, Jagged exhaled into his breath mask and said a silent apology to Jaina.
It looked as if it was truly going to be his last day alive.
-)[-III-](-
Jaina Solo knew something was up the minute she felt an alien surge of aggression wash over the Geroon system. Though her force was relatively intact, since there had been little fighting outside a few skirmishes since the Killiks had taken the planet, the Vagaari-Chiss-Imperial alliance was far from fighting shape. They had taken heavy losses during those first few months and, due to their location, were unable to replace those losses in the subsequent month and a half that had followed.
It was a blessing that the Chiss had developed such a terrifying weapon that was the parasite bomb. Information gleaned from a Yuuzhan Vong study of nanites taken from planets in the Utegetu Nebula, and basic Chiss and Imperial efficiency, had led to a bio-mechanical terror that bordered on war-crime. Something no Jedi in their sane mind would ever condone or even consider. Yet, this was no ordinary situation, no ordinary enemy. Conventional means would have gotten many thousands of their own people killed, casualties they could ill-afford. Especially since their failure would mean that the Killiks would have free reign over hundreds of systems.
At least that's what Jaina tried to tell herself when she read the reports coming back from the sensor probes and surveillance equipment left on Geroon. The Killiks had become docile after capturing the planet, using the time to rebuild their numbers and mine whatever ore the Vagaari had left. But it was a false peace. The parasite bomb was designed to be slow, lingering, highly contagious, with no hope of recovery for any infected. It slowly dissolved the lining within the cells of the internal organs over the course of several months, and converted the biomatter into a toxic byproduct that essentially made anyone infected a walking timebomb. And this was developed by the so-called good guys to be used on a sentient race and all of those Joined to said race.
The month and a half of observing had revealed that the parasites had taken hold, spreading rapidly across the entire population on the surface of the planet. Even better was the initial reports that the Killiks that had returned to the fleet had begun spreading the parasite as well. And the Killiks seemed none-the-wiser that a microscopic force was eating them up from the inside.

But with the sweep of aggression came a sudden uptick in Killik activity. That naturally sounded alarms and caused an emergency meeting of the fleet commanders
"*What are we looking at*?" Assistant Syndic Nuruodo asked professionally.
"*They're pulling out*," Admral Vitor Reige stated the obvious. They were watching from the safety of the outer edge of the system as streams of Killiks began to leave the planet.
"[*But why*?]" Supreme Commander Ariarsh asked in confusion. "[*We have done nothing to provoke them*.]"
"It was the Force…" Jaina trailed off as sensations trickled through the Myrkr bond from more than one source. Her eyes widened and she had to grip the table in front of her as her entire being reverberated from the sensory feedback. "Lowie…Tenel Ka…Tekli…"
X-wing blazing as its ripped up engines erupted. Ejection impossible. A snow-capped mountain…blackness.
Starcruiser spinning, pain, failure, despair, the white –hot glow of re-entry…
Overwhelmed, frantic, people dying all around her and she couldn't stop any of it. The ship taking hits, now in as much trouble as everyone else. Bacta tanks exploding all around. Hopeless, everything was so hopeless…
Jaina gasped, trying to suck in air. Air that was promptly released again as a second set of sensations washed over her. "Tesar…Zekk…"
She retched, coughing as the acid burned and teared her eyes. She knew then and there that at least one of her Myrkr teammates had died.
"Ma'am!" Imperial Jedi Sivan Draco hurried to her side, but Jaina waved him off.
She straightened, wiping her mouth off on the sleeve of her Jedi robe. Her irises were hard, almost black chips of obsidian as she coldly raised an eyebrow at the others. "Get the fleet ready, the bugs are going on the offensive. It's their final push. Welk has entered the battlefield over Ilum and has seized direct control of the hive mind."
"*If they launch an all-out attack, we have neither the numbers nor ordnance to repel it*," Admiral Reige said with concern.
"Just once I wish you Chiss and Imperials were a little more efficient in your genocidal weapons of mass destruction," Jaina said under her breath. "No choice. We have to hold out until my brother can take out Welk. Otherwise these bugs are going to punch through and wipe out the rest of us. Space the three-fleet formation, get all surviving and battle-ready vessels into position. Any medical or non-combat ships are

to jump to the nearest Vagaari outpost. Hopefully they can ride out the war from there."
"*What's the plan*?"
"Heck if I'm going to let the Killiks recall all their people and get into formations of their own. We are not going to wait for them to come to us."
Jaina gestured to her own bridge crew, and orders were quickly distributed through the chain-of-command. She then hit her own comm-button. "Fighters, you're all going in full throttle. Frigates and light-cruisers you're on dartfighter duty, leave the big ships for our cruisers and dreadnaughts."
"All fighter wings and captains acknowledging."
"*We'll follow your lead in, Solo*," Admiral Reige said. "*You do have the biggest ship in the fleet after all*."
"It'd be my pleasure," Jaina said with a smirk. She looked to another part of the bridge crew even as the GA fleet began its fast-past clip towards Geroon. "The moment we even have a tentative firing solution, open fire. Save the warhead for the larger ships."
"[*Ambassador Solo*.]"
"Yes?"
"[*We still have all the ordnance we were going to use to destroy Geroon. How would you like them to be used*?]"
Jaina stared off at the Killik fleet for several long minutes, then with a predatory smile she cocked her head. "Bring them over to my ship, I have an idea."
-)[-IV-](-
Anakin Solo's face was stone-like as he raced down the halls of the *Sunrider*. There was no mistaking Welk's entrance into the battle. The Force pounding out its warning so loudly that it was like a three-hundred piece brass band playing an intimidating march inside an echo-chamber. All three fields of battle were losing spectacularly and rapidly, with Jedi in particular suddenly receiving the Rancor's share of deaths. Welk's abilities were being amplified by the lifeforce and minds of millions upon millions of Killiks and Joiners, leaving the dwindling GA force with very little to fall back upon.
He tried not to let his anxiety show, even as he felt long-time friends of his brother and sister wink out of the meld whether from unconsciousness or death. But again, he couldn't help but have flashbacks to Myrkr. Had he truly led them all to their doom on some misguided attempt to play Hero of the Galaxy? As quick as those thoughts came, he shuffled them aside. One thing was for certain, the Jedi Order was going to have a very slow time rebuilding after this.

With most of the more experienced Knights and Masters still in the greater galaxy, the apprentices and greener Knights were definitely getting a crash-course in galaxy-saving via seat-of-your-pants-planning.
"Got to hand it to him, he does know how to make an entrance," Lomi Plo said sarcastically, her vocal implant keeping her voice distorted and 'evil' sounding despite the amused aura she was radiating.
"You did want him to enter the battle," fellow Nightsister Rena Lai chortled. "He obliged you."
"We finally get to end this," her younger brother Quin Lai hissed. Both he and his sister were making no effort to disguise their eagerness for battle.
"Yes, yes, go all bloodlust and everything," Waxarn Kel muttered from a step behind them, rolling his eyes. "I swear this has to be the oddest team I've ever agreed to be on."
"You and me both," Kyp chimed in. "How about you, Damaya?"
"Nightsisters," was all the Singing Mountain clanswoman said in disdain.
"Then again, it's because we're all countering the dark side with dark side auras of our own that we're not fainting in despair," Lomi chimed.
The group scrambled onboard the *Falcon*, quickly taking the places they had agreed to. Both the Lai siblings were in the gun-turrets, Anakin and Kyp in the pilot and co-pilot seats respectively, and Waxarn and Lomi in the passenger seats. Maintaining their Battlemeld in meditation in the *Falcon*'s parlor was Damaya.
"This is the *Falcon*, all systems are green and we are ready for take-off," Anakin said evenly.
"*Roger Falcon, hyperspace reversion in ten, nine, eight…"*
"Here goes nothing," Kyp said grimly.
The select group of ships Anakin had kept out of the battle reappeared in dramatic fashion over Ilum. The moment the hyperspace shell fell away, the *Falcon* roared out of the *Sunrider*'s hangar, looking like a comet streaking across the Ilum sky.
Seconds later, the ship carrying Jacen and his apprentice arrived as well.
"Jacen," Anakin noted over the comm.
"*Tenel Ka*," was all Jacen said.
"You going after her or Welk?"
"*Welk. Can't do anything about this war if I go to her now*."
"My fleet will provide cover, just stay close and we'll meet at the same hangar."
"*Understood*."

The half-dozen asteroids that Welk had brought with him were still being surrounded by the remnants of the Ilum Killik battle-group. Said remnants stood no chance against the dozen heavy Mon-Cals and Nebula-class Star Destroyers in Anakin's fleet. The three wings of fighters also kept in reserve streamed out to challenging the few dartfighter squadrons in existence.
"All fighters, form up on our position. Let the enemy fighters pass by us," Anakin ordered. "Our main goal is to neutralize the Killik leader Welk. He's in the asteroid-base, tag being transmitted to all vessels now. Cruiser force, just as we practiced. Your main goal is to neutralize any remaining Killik ship in this region. No quarter will be given until you receive a signal from my brother or myself."
The Killiks reacted with utter surprise that such a new force would dare challenge them; especially with Welk broadcasting his heebie-jeebies at full-power. They retaliated immediately, firing off missiles, lasers, and all manner of destructive energy at the new arrivals, only to have the attacks miss or be absorbed by the ships' shields. Anakin's forces returned fire, decimating the Killik ranks and continuing forward without stopping.
Two of the asteroids rotated, revealing a scaled-down version of the dish seen on the Death Star. Anakin's fleet was already diving as the single Pulsar-station-sized superlasers crisscrossed across space. Commanded by Admiral Nek Bwua'tu, the wily Bothan leader had expected such a surprise given how the bugs had already made a second Pulsar Station.
"Enemy fighters closing," Kyp reported, shortly before the space around them was filled with laser fire.
"Leave it to the turret-people," Anakin replied.
"The who?"
"Sorry, been spending too much time talking with the *Veila*," Anakin said distractedly. "The Lai siblings."
Kyp just shook his head. "Talking to your ship is a sign of insanity you know."
"Dad does it all the time to the *Falcon*, isn't that right, girl?"
A superlaser flashed by again narrowly missing the *Falcon*. Several fighters escorting them were vaporized in an instant.
"That was too close," Waxarn exhaled, his grip on the arms of his chairs white.
"Looks like Welk's on to us."
"We *are* on the most recognizable ship in the galaxy," Lomi drawled. "No one else has a Corellian transport this ugly."

The other superlaser-equipped asteroid managed to knock out a Mon Cal and two of the support cruisers.
"If the admiral doesn't do something about those asteroids…" Kyp said grimly.
"Ignore them, that's not our worry," Anakin said, his gaze focused as he continued to push the *Falcon* to ever faster speeds while still performing the death-defying maneuvers that helped them survive. Their fighter escort had peeled off to engage the few squadrons of dartfighters and was making short work of the unshielded but very fast ships.
"How about the other two asteroids moving into our path now?" Waxarn gestured to the said asteroids trying to trap the *Falcon* in a flanking maneuver. Alarms began to flash in the cockpit. "Or the volley of missiles they just fired at us."
"You guys are all just a dark-side cloud of doom, aren't you," Anakin retorted.
"Anakin half your team is dark Jedi and the other half couldn't give a womprats rear about it." Kyp said from the side of the younger man.
"Good point. Remind me to bring someone much more cheery for the next suicide mission I go on."
"Tahiri would flay you if you signed up for another," Waxarn said.
"Then tell the galaxy to stop sending them my way," Anakin jerked hard on the throttle and the ship entered a dizzying spin. The horde of missiles that had been homing in on them tried to match the spin and ended up wiping each other out.
"*Falcon, this is Admiral Bwua'tu, maintain your current course. On my mark please put all power to reverse and lock in your auxiliary systems*."
"Awaiting your mark, Admiral," Anakin said in reply.
"He does realize that if we maintain our current course we'll collide with the missile-spewing asteroid in front of us, right?" Lomi said in disbelief.
"*Mark*."
Anakin slammed on the breaks, throwing the engines in reverse at the same time. The *Falcon* bucked violently, shuddering at the treatment and violation of the laws of momentum. Almost simultaneously, the other superlaser-mounted asteroid fired. The green beam lanced through the space Anakin's ship would have traveled in, and promptly blew apart one of the missile-spewing asteroids in a severe case of friendly fire.
"That's why he's in charge," Anakin muttered dryly, resuming his course towards Welk's base.

"Bug's aren't going to make that mistake again,"
"It's okay, the way's clear," Anakin said. Despite his words, Welk's asteroid wasn't about to just let them land, and was throwing everything from lasers to missiles to the kitchen sink at them. Even then, the *Falcon* was more than maneuverable to avoid most of the oncoming fire, its shields absorbing the rest. "Get ready to dock. No telling what Welk has on that moon-sized rock of his. Jacen, you still with us?"
"I *am, nice flying*."
"Thanks. Last thing I want to do is tell dad I got his ship scorched by a giant green beam of certain death. We're heading for the northern cap of the asteroid-moon thingy Welk has for his flag."
"*I copy, following you in*."
"See you on the surface, Jace," Anakin remarked lightly.
-)[-V-](-
"Go, go, go, go," Jaina breathed, using the Force to watch the stealth-field equipped assault shuttle flee from the Killik hive-ship—a spitcrete vessel currently containing a couple of queens and a whole host of baby-Killiks in the making. Normally she would be on said assault shuttle, in the cockpit, feeling the adrenaline as she played the age old past time of heroes past, 'race the timer on the very powerful bundle of explosives'. Instead she was on the *Megador*, just an observer, helpless to do anything as Sivan Draco and the crack team of commandos he had led aboard slowly made their way back to the rest of the fleet.
"Any sign the Killiks have detected them?"
"No ma'am. The techs' improvements on the stealth field are effectively shielding their electromagnetic fields."
"Good," Jaina said evenly. Having learned from the failure of the droid-fighters to recloak and remain undetected, the times spent milling about the outer edges of the Geroon system was used to perfect the cloaking technologies. Even then, they hadn't been tested with anything larger than a fighter until this moment. And the device still needed a Jedi to shield the occupants of the shuttle from harmful levels of radiation.
"The shuttle is clear. Killiks are showing no indication that they detect it."
"Signal the fleet, all ahead full, weapons and shields ready."
Jaina's strike-force, led by her *Megador* pushed out from the orbit of the nearest planet in attack formation. The Killiks picked them up immediately and ceased their evacuation of Geroon to meet the unexpected threat. As the swarms massed around their command ship,

the planet-destroying-lode of explosives detonated at the ship's engines. The result was a brilliant ball of fire that turned the spitcrete command-ship into the equivalent of a space-borne scattergun. The giant pieces of the ship sheared off and spun around, taking out other ships and turning *them* into ballistic fields of debris as well. So tightly packed was the Killik formation that dozens of vessels were destroyed and many other damaged in that singular blast.

The blast which had annihilated several queens and their growing brood.

The chaos that followed allowed Jaina's force to pound the Killiks with impunity.

"Fire everything, don't hold back," Jaina directed. "We don't know how long the confusion is going to last, but with Welk in control I don't want to take any chances."

The brief moment of euphoria faded even faster than usual as Welk asserted his will throughout the scattered hives. One second, the Killiks had been running around like a gizka without a head, and the next they were a lethal killing machine returning fire with dangerous precision.

The *Megador* continued to pump a steady stream of turbolasers, ion blasts, and missiles into the fray, the Super Star Destroyer wrecking havoc like many of its predecessors had in the past. It was also making for a very big target as the swarms of Killik ships signaled it out as the target to down.

"Keep at it," Jaina said.

"Ma'am! They're even more organized than before!" A tactical officer called out in panic. "They're localizing their fire and overloading individual shield generators. It's like they know all our moves before we're going to do it. Their fighters are also…"

Jaina held up a hand. "Keep calm. It's the Force. This is what a Battlemeld feels like when employed against us."

"What are we going to do?"

Jaina moved over to the console. "Patch me through to the *Rhysode*."

"Connection established."

"Captain Avorn. Is either Alex or Rahm with you at the moment?"

"*Both are, Jedi Knight Solo*."

"Great, put them on."

"*Jaina*," Rahm saluted with his metal hand.

"*Helluva battle going on,*" Alexander Astin bowed his head.

"I'm going to need all of the Imperial Jedi in Battlemeld maintenance," Jaina said. "We're the only group that has no outside Jedi support so it

will be up to the Crossbones and Black Hearts to keep everyone from becoming demoralized."
"*That's quite the tall order. These kids are trained, but they haven't felt mass-death in the Force. We could be warping our apprentices' view of things too early*," Alexander said grimly.
"It's either that or you guys take the *Rhysode* and get out of here," Jaina said. In the background, a Vagaari cruiser exploded from two broadsides. "With Welk going full Battlemeld on us with millions of Killik brains, we're not going to last too long. Antaria Wellos is already strained as it is trying to keep our people from fleeing."
"*We'll do what we can*," Rahm said, looking grim. "*We did agree to have them out here in the first place. Might as well introduce them to the un-glamorous side of war*."
Meanwhile, the battle raged full force outside. TIEs of various make and models roared through the stars and took on the dartfighters and Killik-appropriated fighter-designs in a pitch dogfight. Cruisers, frigates, and all manner of vessels exchanged fire, often at point blank range, tearing each other to pieces. The element of surprise long gone, the GA forces were now steadily pressing back against the Force-enhanced Killik fleet.
Captain Avorn's hologram flickered back on. "*Jedi Solo, I've been told to relay a message from the Jedi on my ship. They say that they cannot bolster the entire fleet, as their apprentices are not that skilled yet. They can, however, bolster smaller groups at a time. Name the group and target and they can make it happen*."
"I copy," Jaina studied the tactical read-out before her. "I'll have coordinates and ships for them shortly, tell them to do what they can for now. Stand by for further instructions."
The Killik fleet continued to act with its eerie synchronization, much like the Yuuzhan Vong had when under yammosk control. Unfortunately for Jaina, there was no such thing as a Force-jammer on the scale she needed. It wasn't like she could magically summon a bunch of ysalmiri or even voxyn to munch on the Force receptive Killik fleet. She breathed out, trying to keep her heart rate under control as she continued to stare at the screen. Patterns, she needed to find a pattern. As powerful and delusional as Welk was, he was only mortal. His thoughts, just like any other being, had a certain tempo to them. Even as her fleet continued to take body-blow after blow, she tuned it out. The Force was her ally. She was a sword. Her weapon was no longer just a lightsaber but the firepower of the fleets at her command. She watched the Killik fleet contract, attack, flank. Watched the swirling dartfighters lash out. Her breathing stayed even, her eyes

fluttering as she took in everything. She could feel the other Force-sensitives in her fleet bolstering her, could feel Welk's malevolent presence corrupting anything that got close to a Killik ship. Back and forth the battle went.
Exhaling sharply one last time, she hit the comm again and rattled off her orders. "Captain Avorn, transmitting targets. Have the Crossbones and Black Hearts take control of wings Two and Three and their supporting ships. When those targets are done, have them switch out to wings One and Five and attack the following vessels."
"*Orders received*."
"Helm, swing us to port and present as wide a profile as possible. Prepare to fire off all weapons at the following coordinates. I don't care if there's nothing there now, just get the guns ready. Have Admiral Reige's people fall back to our position."
"Ma'am!"
Jaina closed her eyes, ignoring the screen in front of her as the Force rushed through her in torrents. "Tell Warmaster Kaan and Supreme Commander Ariarsh to push their attack. The Killiks *will* break, we just need more time. Have the Assistant Syndic bring up her forces to reinforce the Vagaari."
Outside, the fleets began their sharp maneuvers, ships falling under the withering Killik counter-fire. Even then, Jaina's plan began to take shape. The attack groups controlled by the Jedi onboard the *Rhysode* lashed out, a volley of torpedoes taking out their designated targets in a flurry that might have otherwise gone unnoticed in a battle full of exploding ships. But, when the Killik ships vanished in balls of fire, the entire Killik formation appeared to contract like some living creature.
"Fire!" Jaina barked.
The full fury of the *Megador* unleashed a concentrated volley directly into the coordinates Jaina had set out for it—just as the Killik fleet began contracting. The ships on the right flank of the Killik fleet inadvertently retreated directly into the line of fire. The ships on the left flank tried to wheel around to provide support, only to be pounded by the Vagaari-Chiss-Yuuzhan Vong attacking force.
The demoralizing wave of Force energy washed over the GA forces again, giving the Killiks some breathing room. But the second group of targets that Jaina had designated for the Imperial Jedi was brought under siege a split second later. The harassing force of a handful of frigates this time nailed several Killik vessels behind the battlelines, then went on to strafe Killik forces on Geroon itself.
Immediately the Killiks abandoned their counter-attack and rushed after this force.

"Put us in the middle of the Killik fleet," Jaina ordered. "Have Admiral Reige micro-jump his people into high-orbit."
"Orders transmitting."
"Captain Avorn, a new set of targets for your baby mind-readers," Jaina said tonelessly, mentally following everything unfolding outside. "These three sets should be the last."
Jaina continued to push the attack, understanding what her brother meant by forcing the Killiks to react. If she waited around, tried to match Welk meld-for-meld, she'd lose. Instead, she had to throw caution out the airlock and make Welk react to her moves instead. She ignored the steady stream of damage reports coming in, occasionally vocalizing a command. The *Megador* was blazing at many points along its triangular prow, Killik fighters and vessels continuing to make suicidal runs in hopes of knocking something important out.
"The Killiks are breaking formation!" An officer called out excitedly.
"Let them run," Jaina said. She could feel that Welk was sacrificing his control over some ships so he could narrow his control over a smaller group, much like she had been doing with the Imperial Jedi. "Focus on the ships still fighting."
The tide was slowly turning.
And Welk was apparently a very sore loser.
Jaina's eyes snapped open. Welk was sending a dozen ships in a collision course with the *Megador*'s bridge. There were too many and they were moving much too fast to shoot them down or avoid them.
"Brace for impact!"
-)[-VI-](-
Jysella Horn supposed she should consider herself lucky. Being on the opposite side of the planet when Welk emerged from hyperspace had spared her forces the orbital bombardment and rainstorm of burning ships. Even then, there wasn't much of her forces left to be spared. The past few months had been trench and tunnel fighting at its deadliest. One of her brother's friends, Seff Hellin, had even been killed when the Killiks burrowed into their command center and massacred everyone inside. Lucky her, she had been on the front-lines at the time. She didn't mourn for Seff, considered herself beyond feeling at the moment. So many deaths, so much destruction, all for an icy ball of rock so the ignorant masses back home wouldn't have to face down these bugs themselves.
"We've lost contact with Northern Command," an exhausted looking Corellian comm-officer reported. His face was streaked with the purple and gray rocky soil that covered Ilum, his eyes bloodshot. "Killiks are

renewing their comm-jamming; anything outside fifty-meters is being blocked."
"Orbital jamming?"
"Yes, ma'am."
"Just great," Jysella said snidely.
After months of brutal fighting, her forces had managed to gain the initiative and were pushing the Killiks back on all fronts. Her forces had been on the verge of launching an attack on the Killik HQ south of the equator. Buried deep under a mountain, it was impervious to orbital strikes, with defensive lines that rivaled what the GA forces had set up. It was an attack planned for several weeks and required careful coordination. The Killiks knew they were coming and had dug in. Taking the location was not going to be easy.
"Tell our people to hold position. I'll try to get in touch with the other Jedi."
"Understood."
Jysella reached out to the Dathomiri team helping her spear-head the charge. Once a team of nine, now a team of four, Sanola Ti's unit had suffered greatly during the battle for the planet. Some heroic deaths, some simple KIAs, but dead was dead. Of the remaining four, Rajade was on a medical frigate still recovering from near fatal injuries. Ijun and one of the Dathomiri Nightbrother twins were the only ones left backing up their squad leader. She made contact, judging their readiness and relaying the bad news. They in turn sent back their understanding, but were still ready to go.
Next up was the Ossus team being lead by Duros Jedi Apprentice Ohali Seroc, and the Yavin IV team being lead by one of Waxarn Kel's Death Knights. Similar communications went back and forth, the others likewise indicating their willingness to proceed.
It didn't really surprise Jysella. After the non-stop months' long fighting, everyone just wanted the war to end—one way or another. Emerging from her trance, but keeping herself connected to the forming Battlemeld, Jysella looked over her shoulder at the ranks of soldiers filling the tunnel behind her. She saw her own grim, stoic expression reflected off their protective visors.
"Show time, boys and girls," Jysella said simply. "Live if you can, but if you have to die, take as many of those bugs with you. Detonate the charges."
With Force synchronization, shaped charges went off simultaneously in several locations. The angry roar of the Killiks in response let the attackers know that they would soon have their hands full.

"Go! Go! Go!" Jysella yelled out over the cloud of dust. Her acidic yellow saber flared into existence as she led the charge over the rubble.

The rest of her forces followed with defiant yells, blasters at the ready. Spilling into a long-abandoned military structure used by the Killiks as their base of operations, the Galactic Alliance force was met with a wall of blaster and projectile fire. Grenades were hurled in both directions, explosions sending members of both sides flying through the air. Heavy laser emplacements mowed down squadron of Galactic Alliance soldier after squad, until they were silenced by shoulder-mounted rockets. Mobile e-web cannons were trucked in, the crews returning the favor against the wall of Killik defenders. Bodies hit the ground on both sides by the half-second, the roar of blaster-fire drowning out all else as acrid smoke filled the enclosed space.

Through it all, Jysella continued to dance through the fight. She whirled around a volley of lasers, her saber flashing repeatedly as it deflected or absorbed more incoming fire. She reached out and intercepted a blaster-bolt with her bare-hand, converting the energy and sending the Joiner shooter flying hard into another group of Killiks. Her saber sliced apart a Killik that had charged at her with a bladed staff, buried itself into another Killik, then was whipped around and took out several more. All around her, the enemy was falling. She ignored the smoke, the screams, the cries, and pressed forward, determined to end every last Killik if she had to.

"Press on!" Jysella ordered her soldiers, the Force adding weight to her command.

Even against the now point-blank counter-fire, the Galactic Alliance forces surged again, sliding into Killik-made trenches in the duracrete floor, sprinting recklessly into the horde of insects and Joiners. They paid for every centimeter taken, but they didn't seem to care. Bolstered by Jysella's command, they became almost as mindless as the Killik drones in their intent to destroy the enemy.

The Killik line wavered, Joiners looking over their shoulder as they felt the deaths of others stationed elsewhere around the base. Jysella landed in the middle of a group of such Joiners and promptly dispatched them with a looping slash around her body. She absorbed several more laser hits, and then flattened the nearby Killik squad.

"They're breaking, keep at it!" Jysella roared.

Her forces obeyed her command, showing no mercy as they steamrolled the last of the Killik defenses. The Killiks broke, fleeing deeper into the base, and taking casualties as Jysella's troopers fired on their retreating forms.

"Leave the wounded, press forward. We can't give them time to regroup," Jysella barked, intent on finishing what she started. Through the Battlemeld, she could feel the other groups have varying degrees of success, and that was enough for her.
Jedi robes torn, face streaked with soot and blood, Jysella turned yellow-irised eyes back to her own soldiers. "That's an order people. The longer they have to regroup, the more of us they'll kill."
"Yes, ma'am!" The remaining soldiers saluted smartly and formed up behind the Corellian Knight.
Jysella continued the pursuit of the fleeing Killiks, vaguely aware of the faded blue crests that adorned the ice and rock-covered walls she was running by. Behind her, the heavy thumping of military boots followed, the soldiers ignoring their exhaustion, their pain, sharing in her goal to be rid of the Killiks once and for all.
They ran into another defensive line, but didn't even stop as the first few ranks of soldiers were decimated. Jysella leaped headlong into the defenders, receiving a couple more burns and cuts, but cutting through the Killiks and Joiners with a dispassionate expression all the same. The wounded GA soldiers were left where they were, and the team pushed on.
Nearing their goal, the hatchery and the many Killik queens within, Jysella's group linked up with Sanola's equally depleted unit.
"Jedi Horn."
"Jedi Ti,"
"The queens are just beyond, looks like in the old reactor room," Sanola said.
"I can sense a lot of Killiks waiting for us too," Jysella said in turn. "It'll be one heck of a fight."
"Our forces won't survive it."
"We give the bugs a month and they will have replaced all the bugs we squashed to get here. Give them another hour and they will have escaped to Force knows where. Any ideas?"
Sanola smiled ferally, the grief from losing most of her squad providing her the fuel she needed to push her exhausted body beyond its limits.
"Kill the queens and go out with a bang."
"I like your thinking. Who wants to live forever anyways," Jysella grinned. She looked over at her forces, waving a hand at them. "Fall back to the entry point and await further orders."
Her unit did as commanded.
"You're sending them away?" Sanola raised an eyebrow.
"They've served their purpose," Jysella shrugged, her eyes a emotionless brown. "No since getting them killed along with myself."

Sanola similarly dismissed her people, then looked at Ijun and the Nightbrother with her. "You two want to go with them?"
The Nightbrother, bearing a nasty gash across his stomach and seemingly powered by hate alone, shook his head in silent rage. Ijun, face covered by his Kaleesh warmask, refused.
"For Dathomi then," Sanola activated her lightsaber.
"For Corellia," Jysella said almost mockingly. She could feel the Yavin and Ossus groups finally overcoming their initial defenders.
The four Force-users held up their lightsabers and stepped into the reactor room. Clicking furiously, scattering about, a contingent of large and heavily armed Killiks were backed by ranks of Joiners. Compound eyes blazing with rage glared down at the interlopers.
The four Force-users looked at each other, lightsaber casting a cone of light before them. With one last nod to each other, they faced their foe and charged. "For the Jedi!"

-)[-VII-](-

Tenel Ka awoke in a world full of pain. The only positive she could think of was that the pain meant that she was alive. The last thing she remembered was being in a ship hurtling towards the Ilum ground at unsafe speeds.
Which wasn't exactly a happy thought.
Her mouth tasted coppery, her limbs did not want to obey the messages she was sending to them, and she was pretty sure the ground was in the opposite direction. Weakly craning her head, she could see that she was pinned to the ceiling, a giant metal girder partially melted into slag holding her in place. Any movement—including her ragged, shallow breathing—set off her pain receptors, and she couldn't see any way to get herself down without bleeding out. And being pinned wasn't the worst of her injuries. Each breath she took caused spasms of agony due to the jagged metal pipe emerging out from her side. She briefly wondered how long she had been unconscious.
Then she had a whole new set of problems to deal with.
A squad of Killik soldiers climbed through the shattered viewport, scouts investigating the crash. Tenel Ka did her best to remain quiet. In her current state—imitating a bug splattered onto a windshield—she couldn't think of a way to fight off the Killiks should they see her. What she also couldn't stop was the steady dripping of her blood from the pipe she had been impaled by.
One such droplet fell directly onto a Killik soldier beneath her. The insect stopped in its tracks, twitching. Very slowly it tilted its head

back. In too much pain to use the Force, Tenel Ka could only meet the Killik's stare defiantly.
The other bugs looked up, chittering breaking out between them.
Then a green lightsaber sliced through the shattered viewport and decapitated half the squad in a twirling arc. The saber was followed by a red one that took care of the other half.
Tenel Ka exhaled sharply in relief, then sucked in a breath at the spike of pain it had caused.
Four people slid down the snowbank and into the ship.
"Hey *Chume*," Zekk waved up at her. His bare torso was covered in bacta bandages and fresh stitches, and he had a splint attached to one leg. "Being in a crashing starship is kind of painful, isn't it?"
"Whoa, how is she still alive?" the voice of Tekli's apprentice, the red-haired talkative Josat gasped. His small size meant that he had avoided grievous injury.
"That's not very polite," Tekli said chidingly, looking similarly unscathed.
"She's the Queen Mother, it'll take more than a high-speed out of control crashing re-entry to kill her," a pale and banged up Taryn voiced. Like Zekk, her torso was wrapped in bacta bandages to the point where she looked to be part-mummy.
"I'm almost afraid to ask what would," Josat muttered under his breath, a new definition of 'god-like' forming in his ten-year old mind.
"Hang in there, we'll get you down," Tekli called up.
"I do not think I have any choice in the matter," Tenel Ka replied weakly.
"Josat, get the med-kit out. We're going to need compression bandages, a couple quarts of the artificial blood solution, and that suture kit."
"Yes, master."
Tenel Ka, in the meantime, looked down at Zekk and Taryn. "Has your memory improved any, my friend?"
Zekk grimaced slightly. "Just flashes, nothing big."
"But flashes are better than nothing," Taryn said supportively, tiredly resting her head on his shoulder. Unlike the others, she didn't have the benefit of the Force to keep her going. In fact, she had only survived the crash of their medical frigate because she had been with Zekk at the time. Another thing Jedi were good for were impromptu airbags.
"We'll get through it together, just like I said back on the ship."
Zekk smiled appreciatively at her and looped an arm around her to take some of her weight off exhausted legs. He glanced back up at the Queen Mother. "What she said, Tenel Ka. We'll be okay."

Tenel Ka smiled in relief. "I am grateful then."
"More grateful if we peel you off the ceiling though, I bet," Zekk said.
Tenel Ka glanced around again. "That would be greatly appreciated."
"Tekli?" Zekk looked to the healer, who had been analyzing their situation.
"You know, I've had Jaina, Tesar's, Anakin's, Tahiri's, and your blood on my hands. I guess it was only a matter of time before I got Tenel Ka's blood on my hands too," Tekli grumbled. "Okay, here's what we're going to do. Taryn, do you think you can use Zekk's lightsaber and a grappling line to get up there and cut away the beam holding her in place?"
Taryn straightened. "I can do it."
"Good. Zekk, levitate said giant beam that will crush us small healers to some place away from said small healers. Josat and I will keep gravity from splattering Tenel Ka all over the ground."
"Okay," Zekk nodded.
"Once the beam is out of the way, float Josat up to Tenel Ka and he'll administer a clotting agent to keep Tenel Ka from bleeding out the moment we remove the pipe from her side. Then, we'll float her down and begin surgery."
"Will I survive?" Tenel Ka asked evenly.
Tekli raised a furry eyebrow of her own. "If I didn't know better I'd say that was an insult, Your Majesty. If I could keep the strike team on Myrkr alive while being shot at from all directions, I can sure as heck keep one impaled and banged up royal pain alive too. I don't know if you haven't realized it yet, but no friend of mine is going to die on me, or the Living Force and I are going to have some words."
The operation to remove Tenel Ka from the ceiling went as planned, the Queen Mother just barely staying conscious through the tidal waves of pain the slight jostling caused. Finally, when she was once again safely on the floor of the bridge, she allowed herself a groan of relief.
"Keep her talking, her body's going into shock," Tekli muttered, her snout twitching as her tiny hands moved furiously across Tenel Ka's wounds.
"The battle?" Tenel Ka managed, looking to Zekk and Taryn.
"Bad," Zekk answered. "Our ship was hit shortly after yours. We weren't as badly damaged, but we still ended up crashing on the planet. Lost a lot of people on impact."
Tenel Ka breathed out again. "Where are we?"
"Mountain range at the equator," Zekk said, channeling his strength into both Tekli and Tenel Ka. "We've had no luck contacting our ground

forces so the four of us set out for the other crash sites in hopes of finding a working comm-system. Yours was the nearest ship in range."
Tenel Ka closed her eyes, mentally reaching out through the stars for her lover. To her surprise, she could feel him in orbit. "Anakin and Jacen have arrived."
"Felt them just as we saw your ship," Zekk nodded. "It's been a couple of days since we were all blasted out of the sky. The ground troops were hammered hard after Welk's asteroids fired off several missile barrages at the planet."
"The other Jedi?" Her voice was but a whisper.
"We know that the Dathomiri lost several," Zekk continued. "The rage of the survivors was pretty powerful. Other than that, everyone's still too far away."
"Josat, give me those adrenal shots," Tekli barked.
The apprentice hastily handed his master the required meds, which Tekli promptly depressed into Tenel Ka's chest. "Damn it, stay alive Your Majesty. It'll suck royally if you break my streak of saving all you guys from certain death. I'm Yun-Tekli for Force sakes, listen to me."
"The fight out here now relies on Anakin and Jacen taking out the big bad boss, doesn't it?" Taryn voiced.
"And hope that the Killiks don't continue their crusade in his absence," Zekk answered. "Because I think our forces have given all we can."
-)[-Chapter End-](-

Denon
-)[-I-](-
Tahiri woke feeling like she had just eaten a particularly sour fruit. After a moment's contemplation, she immediately remembered why. After all, if Danni Que had made the amphistaff anti-venom taste good in any way, more people might have gone out and gotten themselves stabbed. Or at least that was Tahiri's reasoning as she opened her eyes and tried to get the bitter taste out of her mouth.
"Welcome back," Mara remarked wryly, handing Tahiri a glass of water. She took a long sip, but it did little to dispel the taste. "Thanks. In the med-bay again, huh?"
"Yup," Mara shook her head. She gestured to her bandaged torso. "Me too."
"Does the other Master Skywalker know?"
"Farmboy told me I was too old to relive my glory days," Mara laughed, nodding. "Said I shouldn't encourage you either. We're mothers now, you know."
Tahiri looked around at that. "Where…"

"Leia has our kids," Mara answered. "They're still on board the *Veila*."
"Where are we?" Tahiri didn't recognize the med-bay. Not that she should have been able to.
"Galactic Alliance med-ship, *Vratix*," the voice of Gilad Pellaeon answered in turn.
Both women looked up to see the Supreme Commander of the GA fleets enter.
"Gilad," Mara greeted.
"Skywalker, Solo," the gray-haired career soldier nodded. "You'll be interested to know that the fighting between the Bothans and Yuuzhan Vong has finally ceased."
Mara saw the puzzled look on Tahiri's face. " You've been out for a while. We've been positioned outside of the Bothan sector monitoring the events. Events that have ended?"
"Yes," Gilad said, taking a seat. "Chief of State Hamner left it in the Jedi Order's hands to form a task force to end the fighting. But by the time the wheels of bureaucracy finally started to churn, it was all over. The Bothans ran out of soldiers before the Yuuzhan Vong."
"So the Bothans…"
"Are on the verge of becoming extinct," Gilad said grimly. "The Yuuzhan Vong must have used the time they had sitting out here to plan their campaign to the finest of details. Most of the Bothan colony-worlds were hit, and the damage to Bothawui is unrecoverable. It only took the Yuuzhan Vong a week and a half, but they have literally wiped out any resistance within the Bothan Sector. In turn, the Yuuzhan Vong have suffered heavy losses, with analysts estimating sixty to seventy percent casualties. Biological weapons were employed on both sides in several system-wide battles. The Vong didn't care about holding systems, only annihilating all Bothan life within them."
Stunned silence followed Gilad's announcement, both Jedi women barely able to fathom the sudden change in the galaxy.
"The Bothan race…there were tens of billions of them," Mara breathed, shaking her head.
"They did do it to themselves," Tahiri murmured, but with no accusation in her voice. "They were the ones that wanted to continue their genocidal war."
"But the women, children, all the civilians," Mara said, shaking her head. "The Vong didn't even care."
"Yuuzhan Vong doctrines," Tahiri looked at the older woman. "Children grow up to become soldiers. Women can wield a weapon just as much as a man can. Their entire race is a warring one, there is no such thing as civilians to them."

"In any case," Gilad continued. "We've been ordered to return to Denon. The Bakuran Hegemony and the Imperial Remnant have both laid claim over a myriad of Bothan assets and Chief of State Hamner does not want GA military units to get in the way. The Bothans are not GA members, so we cannot give them any aid without their direct request."
"What of the Yuuzhan Vong forces?" Tahiri asked.
"The surviving vessels have already jumped to hyperspace, and we assume they are returning to Zonama."
Tahiri closed her eyes, the pain of having failed to stop the Bothan-Yuuzhan Vong conflict stinging. But then, how could she have stopped something when another force had been driving the two sides to war. When the entire galaxy had been focused on the Killiks, the bugs had actually been a non-factor. It had been the Slayers, or at least three of them, who had been responsible for the mess.
The Slayers and their master.
Tahiri shuddered. She didn't want to think about who that master could be. The Bothan-Yuuzhan Vong conflict might have wound down, but the Slayers' master and the other Slayers who had survived were still out in the galaxy somewhere.
"Tahiri," Mara said softly.
"I'm okay," Tahiri forced herself to smile. "Can't do anything if two dunderheaded races want to blast themselves into oblivion can I? The fighting's over. The Yuuzhan Vong are returning to Zonama, nothing else for us to do out here. Even though the end result could have been better, we at least have time for our family's now."
"If it were only that easy," Mara returned Tahiri's grim expression. "We need to let the Jedi Order and Hamner know about the Slayers' involvement. If the rest of them are still out there in the galaxy somewhere, they have to be found before they influence another genocidal war."
"Kenth won't want to hear it," Tahiri said. "I remember what he was like during the Yuuzhan Vong War. If things didn't line up into what he expected them to be, then he ignored it. It was why he stayed in the political realm when most other Jedi were picking up lightsabers and heading to the front-lines. We tell him that his peaceful galaxy is in danger and he'll tell us that it's the Jedi's job to do something about it. Especially if the bad guys are Force sensitive."
"She has a point," Gilad agreed. "The Chief of State might be politically savvy enough to bring the government into order, but he is not the leader you want in charge if things start going bad."

"I'm guessing you don't intend to remain in office for much longer, Supreme Commander?" Mara arched an eyebrow at the elder soldier.
Gilad smiled bitterly and shook his head. "No. Once The Solos come back with all the ships I gave them and the galaxy settles down, I'm stepping down. With everything that keeps happening, I want to enjoy some manner of life that I've spent my entire existence fighting for."
"General Antilles, Tycho, and Farlander all retired once, twice, they seem to like doing it repeatedly." Tahiri pointed out. "What if I asked you very nicely to come back a week or so after stepping down? Think about what would happen if the Chief of State was allowed to appoint a like-minded person to your position. Do you really want that?"
Gilad waved a finger at Tahiri. "You're going to be the death of me, you know that, Jedi Solo? I already have the Imperial Remnant calling me a turncoat, questioning my commitment to the Empire. I don't remember the last time I visited my homeworld. I'm determined to see Hamner's first term through at least, then, after that…we'll see."
"So, what's waiting for us on Denon?" Tahiri said, switching topics. "I had of enough committees back during the other Yuuzhan Vong War. I'm really not in the mood to sit through another bunch of meetings where nothing gets done."
"I think the Chief of State is withholding any clear course of action until the war with the Killiks is over," Gilad said. "He doesn't want to start a course of action without his favorite dejaarik piece in front of him."
"My husband," Tahiri muttered, rolling her eyes.
"Yes," Gilad confirmed. "If your husband is successful, then the Chief of State will most likely plan parades, banquettes, and all manner of excess."
"Yes, and let's not talk about the other option," Tahiri said quickly, double-checking her bond with her childhood friend. "He'll make it back. He promised."
-)[-II-](-
The familiar sight of Denon in the senses of the *Veila* caused Tahiri to sag in her seat and focus on the input from the cognition hood. To many, Denon was home, the hub of the galactic government that oversaw thousands of systems. To her, it was an ugly mess of buildings and technology. Of waste and greed. Of everything that was wrong with the galaxy. On the surface, it looked so impressive, a marvel of civilization. But peeling back the layers, that outer glamour hid only the corruption and darkness that permeated the Galactic Alliance.
"Mo~mmy," her copilot pouted. "Negatude, off!"

Tahiri, shaken from her thoughts, had to laugh as she turned her head towards her daughter. "Sorry about that Cassa. That's what happens when your dad isn't around to soak it up for me."
"He'll be back soon," Cassa answered with childlike certainty.
"He better," Tahiri nodded.
Receiving clearance from Denon Control to dock at the Chief of State's personal landing platform.
Tahiri withheld her first opinion about the matter. "Great, tell Control that we're going to the public spaceport and then to our apartment. He already has the report about what happened, if wants to talk further he'll know where to find us."
I think you made the control-people panic. The Veila's thoughts came a second later. *They are insisting that the Chief of State person is personally waiting and would be grumpy if you don't show.*
"Do you have a visual on the landing platform?" Tahiri asked, lifting the cognition hood to rub at her tired eyes. If Hamner was waiting, she'd bet her pet rakamat that he had an army of media people with him. The last thing she wanted was to put her children in the media spotlight.
"Receiving communication from the Jade Shadow. Patching it through."
"Master?" Tahiri said.
"*For the hundredth time, I stopped being your master a while ago*," Mara answered back. "*Just call me Mara or Aunt Mara if you really have to. Aunt makes me sound old*."
"Sitting in a chair with knitting needles and reruns of the holo-soaps that all you people watch?"
"*That's right, keep going*." Mara replied wryly, the giggles of Ben, Janek, and Kani heard in the background. "*I was going to say that you guys can go on home, we'll give the Chief of State the photo-op and sound bites he wants*."
"Are you sure?" Tahiri said, her eyes darting to her still-wearing-the-cognition-hood daughter.
"*Yeah, Ben and Janek are used to the cams and the glam that come with being a Skywalker these days. They can handle it*."
"Thanks, I owe you."
"*We're family Tahiri*," Mara said gently. "*Go on home and look after those amazing kids of yours. Then work on that lecture you're going to give my nephew when he gets back from stomping bugs*."
"Will do," Tahiri pated the *Veila*'s control nodule. "You heard her, girl. Let's go home."
"*Home is Zonama*."
"Good point. To the big ugly spaceport then."

"*Full of all the dumb ships*," the Veila said sullenly.
"Okay, okay, to the Yuuzhan Vong embassy's landing pad then," Tahiri sighed. "We'll return to Zonama someday, *Veila*. Promise."
"*The reason why we left is over*." Tahiri's sentient ship protested. "*We have no reason to stay in the galaxy. **I** don't belong in this galaxy*."
Tahiri gently caressed the *Veila*'s dashboard, her expression soft and understanding. "You're doing a real good job of toughing it out. If we do stay long, we'll try to visit some of the Yuuzhan Vong colonies so you have someone to talk to."
"Mommy."
"Yes, Cassa?"
"Can we stay?"
Tahiri looked to her daughter, who seemed to be organizing her thoughts and words. "Cassa?"
"Stay in the galaxy longer. Zonama is fun and everything, but Jedis'sei was the only other Force-sensitive besides you and daddy and Auntie Tekli and Danni. Cousin Ben and Janek are nice too, and Kani is amazing and there are so many other Jedi. And there are so many other languages to learn too. All of them make different sounds but can mean the same thing or mean different things. And there are so many other planets and the…"
"Okay, okay," Tahiri chuckled, a sad smile on her face as she mussed her daughter's hair. "I'll talk with your dad when he gets back. Then you, me, him, the *Veila*, and Jayce, we'll decide as a family. We'll decide what our place in this galaxy is together, Okay?"
"Okay."
-)[-III-](-
Tahiri finally allowed herself a breath of relief as she sensed Cassa finally drift into a deep sleep. Stretching, she looked around the place she had called home since she had returned to the galaxy. Their Denon apartment was sparse, with the bare minimum of furniture sitting on wood-paneled flooring. Simple durasteel chairs, utilitarian dining table. A sofa, a coffee table, a playpen for Jayce. When she and Anakin had first moved in, they had never expected to stay for as long as they had. Never expected to fight a war that no one seemed to have been the wiser about. On the icebox were several drawings created by Cassa to 'pretty-up' the place, but that was the only personal touch. She had seen bunk-rooms on starships with more personality. Then again, she and Anakin had rarely used the apartment
In their time in the galaxy, they had been running around from one meeting to another, trying to manage fleets, warmongering races, and to keep the Killiks from burning the galaxy down around them. The

Veila's quarters had been a more familiar and easily accessible place of rest than this metal walled structure they now inhabited.
Rubbing her eyes with one hand, Tahiri activated the HoloNet transceiver with the other.
"*In other news, the Chief of State has once again made another bold move and is cutting support to the Outer Rim sectors that do not directly contribute to the well-being of the Galactic Alliance. In turn, he is making these territories the responsibility of the greater governments that exist in the Outer Rim. Grand Moff Quille has issued a statement in turn, welcoming the move and saying that the Empire will do what it can for these territories. The Crown Prince of the Tion Hegemony has likewise approved of the move and has vowed that Tion will not let its neighbors go...*"
Tahiri changed the channel, only to hear about some holo-starlet she had no idea about and the latest scandal she'd embroiled herself in. Another flick, and another. Despite her searching, there was no mention of the war with the Killiks. No mention of the fighting or the number of dead. She checked the local channels, maybe there was something there about the small nest of Killiks that had set up in the undercity. Nothing. With an annoyed huff, Tahiri was about to turn the device off, when the next story caught her attention.
"*Earlier today esteemed Jedi Master Mara Jade Skywalker and her children returned from the frontlines of the Bothan-Vong War and our reporters were there when they were greeted personally by Chief of State Hamner. Here's what he had to say just before they arrived.*"
Pouring herself a glass of water, Tahiri half kept an ear open to the story.
"*Chief of State, would you say that the attempts to mediate between the Yuuzhan Vong and the Bothans were an abysmal failure on behalf of the galactic government*?"
"*To put it bluntly, yes. My predecessor saw this storm brewing nearly a full year before but did nothing. The Bothan's seceded, which should have been a red flag for everyone, but still Omas did nothing. The heroic efforts of Master Skywalker and Jedi Knight Solo to bring peace came much too late because of the delays of the previous administration*."
With an annoyed flick of her wrist, Tahiri deactivated the device. It was easy to blame the previous administration for the situation the government was in, Cal Omas had placed much of the blame of the disastrous war-effort against the Yuuzhan Vong on his predecessor, and now he was getting it in turn. Easy to blame, a lot harder to fix.
Her thoughts returned back to Zonama Sekot and the Yuuzhan Vong,

her people. She might have merged personalities and accepted her humanity, but both her old-self and Riina wanted a family, a background to belong to, and they both agreed to make the Yuuzhan Vong that background.
What was the next step for the Yuuzhan Vong? Fortunately, no one wanted to go after the Yuuzhan Vong after the Bothans were wiped out. But on the downside, she couldn't see the Yuuzhan Vong becoming any more integrated into the galaxy now that they had showed they were still the same boogey-men everyone feared. Yet, was she and Anakin supposed to keep swooping in, helping the Yuuzhan Vong however they could whenever the Yuuzhan Vong miss-stepped. Was *that* the role of the Jedi? Or were they finally going to wash their hands of the Yuuzhan Vong and let the extra-galactic peoples find their own way without any more guidance.
The door chime rang, and Tahiri frowned. The hour was rather late for a casual calling, and she didn't feel any of her extended Solo-Skywalker side of the family on the other side of the door either. Carefully, she activated the camera that watched the door and saw a small delegation of official looking people on the other side.
"What do you want?" Tahiri said simply.
A war-worn older officer looked up into the camera. "Jedi Solo, there has been a string of incidents regarding the Yuuzhan Vong."
Tahiri released her breath in a slow controlled hiss. "Incidents?"
"Several Yuuzhan Vong colonies have been hit with reprisal attacks by those trying to avenge the Bothans. The Yuuzhan Vong embassy in the Mid-Rim region was also hit. Chief of State Hamner is requesting your immediate presence as he fears this might bring the Yuuzhan Vong fleet back for retribution."
"Tell him I'm on my way," Tahiri answered, already jotting down a note for her daughter in case Cassa woke up.
"There's more."
"More?" Tahiri's hand had been hovering over the off switch.
"We've lost all contact with Zonama."
Tahiri absorbed that information for a moment, turning off the comm and opening the door. "What do you mean?"
"The Chief of State can explain it when you meet with him." The officer gestured.
"What's with all the guns? Expecting a war?" Tahiri gestured to the heavily armed and armored contingent with him.
"Your protection, Jedi Solo," the officer said. "Anti-Yuuzhan Vong sentiment has risen once more, and your ties to their government are well known. Since combat had not broken out until you arrived there

are HoloNet reports that it was you who gave the order to fire on the Bothan forces."
"Wonderful. They can stay here then."
"Je…"
"My son and daughter are in this apartment," Tahiri said coolly. "I already told Hamner that if he wants to talk to me, he can come here. If the danger is as great as you say it is, then I am more than capable of looking after myself. My six year old daughter and one and a half year old son are not."
"Very well," the officer gestured, and the soldiers filed into the apartment.
"There's some leftover food in the fridge if you get hungry," Tahiri said off-handedly. "Diapers in the top shelf above the ice-box, emergency contacts by the comm. I'll let Leia Solo know about the situation and she should be by later."
The eight guards blinked in silent acknowledgment.
Tahiri looked to the officer. "Let's go."
-)[-IV-](-
Arriving at the capitol building, Tahiri was quickly ushered through the hallways. She could sense a fair amount of unease and fear permeate the air, as well as an increasing sense of urgency. To sum it up, she had a really bad feeling about the briefing.
Entering Hamner's office, she acknowledged the galactic head with a polite tilt of her head. "Chief of State."
"Jedi Knight Solo, thank you for coming at such a late hour."
"Reprisal attacks on Yuuzhan Vong targets," Tahiri began.
Kenth nodded grimly. "The True Victory Party has gained strength not just among Bothans, but in its myriad of forms in nearly two-hundred systems. In the last ten galactic hours, over a dozen Yuuzhan Vong targets have been attacked by extremists and Bothan sympathizers. Reports are still coming in, but the death toll is catastrophic. We must do something before the Yuuzhan Vong fleet leader decides to turn his fleet around and leave more death in his wake."
Tahiri looked through the reports Hamner gave her, eyes widening at the casualties listed. The attack on the Yuuzhan Vong embassy on Ord Mantell killed most of the five-thousand Yuuzhan Vong living in their isolated colony on an island on that planet. Another attack on the Yuuzhan Vong colony on Birgis left another several thousand dead or dying.
"Your man told me that you've lost contact with Zonama too?"

"Yes, the villip choirs can't locate their counterparts and all buoys and probes have gone dark. We're sending a ship to investigate, but it's highly likely the hyperspace-able planet moved."
"So you've lost a planet," Tahiri remarked. "As a Chief of State, isn't that a little embarrassing?"
"This is no laughing matter."
"No, it isn't. Missing planet, attacks on Yuuzhan Vong non-combatants, what do you intend to do about it, Chief of State? The Jedi are the least equipped to handle this situation."
"The Yuuzhan Vong listen to you, Jedi Solo. I would like you to tell the Yuuzhan Vong that they have my condolences and my reassurance that the perpetrators of these acts will be brought to justice. They are still part of the Galactic Alliance and it is our duty to aid them in their time of need."
"You know who the perpetrators are, you said so yourself. The True Victory party or whatever they call themselves. To show the Yuuzhan Vong you are a man of your word, pass laws outlawing them, strip them of any political power they have in the government."
"That is where things get tricky. The people have the right to voice their opinions, and many in the galaxy believe that the Yuuzhan Vong got off lightly at the end of the war. To censure the True Victory party will cause great unrest and discontent in all corners of the galaxy. Add to that is the fact that the Yuuzhan Vong were never really disarmed at the end of the war and are still flying around in an armada of aging, but lethal vessels. We also need concrete evidence that the True Victory party is behind these attack, as well as specific names of the ringleaders involved."
Hamner's comm chimed. He offered Tahiri an apologetic shrug and answered it. "Go ahead."
"Sir, another Yuuzhan Vong operation has been hit. This time it was the restoration team working on Wayland."
"Emperor's Bones!" Hamner swore. "Thank you, I'll deal with it."
"In the meantime I'll tell all shaping teams to withdraw." Tahiri said when Hamner disconnected.
"What?"
"The shaping teams are the most vulnerable and highest profile outside the colonies and embassies. They have minimum security and are entirely made up of non-combatants. If these True Victory people want to sacrifice world-building for their petty hatred, then let the galaxy know who's at fault."
"Jedi Solo, I hardly think that…"

"You cannot tell the Yuuzhan Vong you have their back, and then let them die while their killers go unpunished," Tahiri answered harshly. "Nor should we have the Yuuzhan Vong risk their lives if the government they are a part of will not do anything to protect them."
"We can assign Jedi to…"
"Which Jedi?" Tahiri said with a harsh laugh. "Forgive me, Chief of State, but the Jedi Order doesn't have anyone available. Those that aren't with Anakin in the Unknown Regions are trying to help rebuild or secure other worlds. Even the High Council is off trying to save the galaxy because the Jedi Order had no one available."
Kenth Hamner hesitated. "Give me two days, Jedi Solo. Two days, then you can tell the shapers to withdraw if the situation has not improved to your liking."
"Chief of State, the Yuuzhan Vong are being murdered by the hour, how many do you expect to be left at the end of two days?"
"I will be tripling security at all restoration projects…"
"With who?" Tahiri pressed, not willing to let the Yuuzhan Vong become forgotten. "Again, what ships you had available are with Anakin. The rest are on assignment and moving them will upset their sectors' senators. Especially if you're moving them to save Yuuzhan Vong lives. One day, Chief of State. If this time tomorrow a single Yuuzhan Vong life has been lost…"
"You will tell the Yuuzhan Vong fleet commander that they will have their justice?"
"Chief of State, you of all people should know that justice isn't a Yuuzhan Vong concept. Vengeance, however, is. If they do not feel like the lives of their people have been avenged, nothing I say will forestall their wrath. Protect the Yuuzhan Vong in this galaxy, punish those that are striking them now, and I will do my best to keep the peace."
"Very well. I'll have Admirals Makin and Limpan reroute elements of their fleet. With the Killik threat in the far reaches of space, the Core does not need as many ships anyways."
"I'll look forward to hearing about those fleet movements," Tahiri said patiently. "In the meantime, I would like to go to the Denon Embassy. If you want me to contact the Yuuzhan Vong diaspora, I will need a master villip choir."
"Of course. I'll have my men escort you over."
-)[-V-](-
Tahiri may have failed to halt the Yuuzhan Vong-Bothan conflict, but she was confident in the fact that she had avoided a Second Yuuzhan Vong War. To say that the Yuuzhan Vong community had been screaming for blood would be an understatement. Thousands dead,

and the perpetrators still roamed free. An entire galaxy seemingly arrayed against them. With the threat of the Yuuzhan Vong over, the galaxy once again quickly rallied around a common foe they could blame for all their woes. The charismatic leaders on various worlds played to that hate, advocating prison planets for the remaining Yuuzhan Vong populations, mass exterminations.

Without any communications with Zonama, the Yuuzhan Vong diaspora's leader was their ambassador to the Galactic Alliance Senate, Zhul Yim. To Tahiri's great relief, Zhul Yim was every bit as reasonable as his crèche-mate Nen Yim. He agreed that meeting violence with more violence would only destroy the Yuuzhan Vong in the end. Unfortunately, the Yuuzhan Vong were rather novices at passive aggressive forms of combat. You go centuries bashing people over the head with amphistaffs, and it becomes a reflex action. Made more difficult was that the twenty-six main Yuuzhan Vong colonies spread throughout the galaxy were all different in personality thanks to the various Domains they were made up of. What resulted was the standard for Yuuzhan Vong diplomacy.

"I am the leader in place of communications from Yuuzhan'tar," Zhul Yim growled, staring down the colony leaders spread out across the villip choir. "I speak with the authority given to me by the Yun'o and the Avatar of Yun-Shuno. If any dares question this, speak now and I will dispatch a Miid Ro'ik to obliterate your brainless form."

"You are a mere shaper of Domain Yim! You dare…"

"And you are an idiot of Domain Karsh," Zhul cut him off. "Former Warmaster Nas Choka saw the wisdom of ending conflicts not with violence but with war."

"And look what happened to him! The Infidel Bothan Race struck him down because he was weak!" Another warrior barked.

"And look what happened to us. We would have been utterly destroyed had we followed the dogmas of Tsavong and those before him," Zhul barked back. "We must show the galaxy that we are not the savages they make us out to be. They bleed us, coat their hands in our heart blood, but in the end, history shall be their judge. It will show that we, proud children of the Yun'o, could endure and stay our hands even under the most trying of conditions. That is the true meaning of strength, knowing when to hold back instead lashing out like a crècheling."

It took several more minutes of persuading the more war-happy Domains to back off, but somehow she and Zhul had managed it. Now it was up to Hamner to do his part.

Still without any sleep, it was nearly noon when Tahiri finally made it back to the Solo apartment.
"Welcome back," Leia Organa Solo greeted.
"Hiya," Tahiri said with an exhausted smile. "Thanks for making it over. Where are the…"
"…And *that* is how you perform the instant-death move from Domain Ruuq," Cassa's voice filtered out from one of the side rooms. "Now you show me how to do that move you did. You said it translated into 'neck breaker'."
Tahiri blinked, looked to her mother-in-law, then hung her head. "Why in the Holy Bantha do I give my daughter babysitters from special forces units?"
Leia chuckled. "On the bright side, no boy is going to get within ten feet of her."
"True," Tahiri giggled. "And any who do will either be very brave or very stupid."
"Here," Leia handed Tahiri a plate of food. "I figured you'd be hungry. I know what all that politicking does to an empty stomach."
"Thanks," Tahiri said, just as her stomach gurgled. "Heard anything from the Chiss sector?"
Leia shook her head. "No media coverage at all. Despite all the reporters Anakin took with him, there's been nothing but silence. It's like the rest of the galaxy isn't even aware that they're fighting out there."
"Bad for Hamner's image of stability I guess," Tahiri said darkly. "Couldn't hide the Yuuzhan Vong-Bothan thing though since it's practically on the doorsteps of the Core Worlds. You know, before he was elected, Anakin and I were going to fix things then return to Zonama. Now…I don't know. I feel like *someone* has to look out for the Yuuzhan Vong. And Cassa likes all the other Force-sensitive kids too. Only thing is that if we stay, I know the galaxy will start looking to Anakin again, and I don't want to put that burden on him."
Leia placed a comforting hand on Tahiri's arm. "You know he'll take that burden anyways, right? He loves you, respects your Yuuzhan Vong side. If it's important to you, it's important to him."
Tahiri smiled whimsically. "I know. He gave me the family I've always wanted. But…I've seen what being in charge does to him. He can take the job, be amazing at it, but it'll wear him down. Make him more dummy than Hero Boy. I don't want that for him. I want him to be able to laugh, smile, without the weight of the galaxy resting on his shoulders. Only problem is, he stops being the dummy I love when that happens. The guy who'll take the messiest of galactic diplomatic

solutions and wrap it all up in a pretty bow. Who'll lead a force of ships from so many different governments, yet somehow get them to work all together to face overwhelming odds. The guy who'd let a lonely orphan girl from Tatooine become his best friend and then give her a family. I can't win no matter what I choose. And of course, Anakin has to be on the other side of the galaxy, so it's not like I can just call him and ask his opinion on the matter."
Leia waited until Tahiri's train of thought slowly rapped itself up. "Speaking from a purely selfish standpoint. It is nice to have you, Anakin, and your children around. You've done an amazing job raising Cassa."
"Thanks," Tahiri blushed slightly. "And I'm sorry that I monopoli…"
"Don't apologize," Leia shook her head. "I know better than anyone what life in the spotlight can do. But if you have the right support, the will, and the ability, it's doable. You're back now. Anakin's taken the spotlight by becoming head of the Galactic Alliance Guard. You've just prevented the Second Yuuzhan Vong War, or so I assume by the relief I was feeling earlier. The Yuuzhan Vong issue is not going to resolve itself right away, and I think it would be beneficial if you were still around to help keep the government grounded when it comes to the Yuuzhan Vong."
Tahiri bowed her head. "I just…I love you guys. Love everything about the Solos, and since I'm one too…I don't know. Growing up, Anakin was the closest thing I had to a family. Sure Kam and Tionne watched over me like a mom and dad, but…I want to keep my family safe and happy, but in order to do so the galaxy has to be a safe happy place too."
Leia continued to rub Tahiri's back. "Just remember, Tahiri. No matter what. We have your back. We're family, and nothing is going to change that."
Smiling faintly, Tahiri rested her tired head against Leia's shoulder. "Thanks…mom."
Leia chuckled warmly. "You're welcome…daughter."
Tahiri giggled. "Now all we have to do is wait for those kids of yours to get home and we can go back to fixing the galaxy together."
"That's the spirit," Leia said supportively.
A second later, Cassa Solo came bounding into the room. "Mommy! Mommy! Colonel Veras taught me this move his special forces people do! He says it's a choky-hod or something like that. Wanna see it!?"
Tahiri and Leia both just started laughing, unable to help themselves.
"Sure, just no demonstrating on your brother," Tahiri rolled her eyes, standing with renewed energy.
"Okay, come on. I'll show you how to do it on Colonel Veras."

Cassa went bopping away back from the room she had come from.
"Save the galaxy later, be a mom now," Leia shooed her.
"Yes, ma'am." Tahiri salute, then went off to save the spec-force soldier from the deadly grip of her six-year old daughter.

-)[-VI-](-

At eleven years old, Ben Skywalker was at that cusp between being a little kid and being a not-so-little kid. But he was still just a kid no matter how you looked at it. Since discovering the Killiks in the Denon undercity, he had been forbidden by his mom to return. Because of that, he had to find new ways to keep himself occupied, all the while avoiding the HoloNet reporters looking for the latest scoop regarding his life. Being a Skywalker was both good and bad in that matter. Good in that he pretty much had full access to the Jedi Temple and could avoid said reporters, bad in that he had reporters following him around in the first place. Unfortunately, there were times when even the temple couldn't provide him sanctuary from the prying eyes of the galaxy.

Lying prone on one of the temple's outer catwalks with his best friend, Ben Skywalker and Kani Asari watched a small scene unfold as several reporters gathered for the story of the day.

"*And we're reporting live from the Jedi Temple on Denon where the Jedi Order is in the process of choosing its Grandmaster. For what I've heard, the Order is mostly split between two camps. Those loyal to Skywalker, and those loyal to Chief of State Hamner. Given the secretive nature of the Jedi Order, it's hard to say which camp has the edge."*

"Madhi has Master Skywalker given any indication of what he would do should he lose?"

"He released a statement through his protocol droid a few minutes ago stating that whatever happened was 'the Will of the Force' and he'd abide by whatever the Order decides. Given his history, it is more than likely he will return to seclusion on Ossus. If his candidate does win, however, one does not need to be a Jedi to know that the Skywalkers will be hanging around Denon a bit longer. There is a small twist to this elections, Eeirn. Even though he is not officially running, the others of the Jedi High Council have put his name on the ballot as well, bringing the number of Jedi running for the Grandmaster position to five. Jedi Masters T'ra Saa, Saba Sebatyne, Kenth Hamner, Kyle Katarn are the others. Jedi Master T'ra Saa wants to bring the Order back from what it is now to more like the time of the Republic. Jedi Masters Sebatyne and Katarn both advocate distancing the Order from the central

government, and Chief of State Hamner the reverse. Only time will tell who will come out ahead."
"Have you received any word about the Solos in the Outer Rim, and how is what they are doing affecting the perception of the Jedi Order internally?"
"I have actually received little word about the Solos. Both the government and the Jedi Order have been very tight lipped about the on-going campaign against the Killiks. But you could also say that the Solos are shaping this Order nonetheless. Recorded earlier, here is an interview I was granted with Jedi Master Uldir Lochett, an instructor at the Denon Temple."
"There's no doubt that Anakin and his siblings are having a profound effect on the latest batch of Jedi we're been training. For the past decade, all the Jedi could really do was watch as the galaxy crumbled around them. Sure, they were working themselves to death trying to fix all the leaks that were popping up, but nothing seemed to improve no matter what we did. For the up-and-coming Jedi, it was nothing like the Holos and stories they had grown up on. Jedi were supposed to swoop in, right wrongs, bring light to the darkness. Well, apparently we needed a jolt of Solo proportions. Jedi of Master Skywalker's era grew up fearing the darkness, learned how patience can eventually win out. They fought their battles methodically, carefully, ever mindful that they could become the very things they were fighting. Jedi of the Solos' era, however, learned the exact opposite. Through the Yuuzhan Vong War, they learned that patience can sometimes create that very darkness you were trying to avoid. They are a generation of actions, of doing. There is the generation that immediately follows the Solos, the Horns, Sarkin-Tainers, and what-have-you, who have learned from both and combine that patience with action. But these days, these latest Jedi could see that none of that was working with our current problems. To them, it doesn't matter if the Jedi Order is integrated further into the government or becomes more independent. The only way they can keep the Jedi Order going is by being Jedi their own way and style. I've heard people say that the Order is divided among those for and against Master Skywalker's ideals. That's not entirely correct. The Order is divided far more than that, and that is what makes us strong. No matter how the election turns out, the Jedi Order of this latest generation are going to march to the beat of their own drums, letting the Force, not politics, dictate how they can best be of service to the galaxy."
"How much longer are we going to be up here?" Ben whispered.
"Shhhh," Kani replied. She pointed with a finger. "Look, over there."

Ben saw a line of transports arrive at the front-entrance of the temple.
"Looks like the Chief of State has arrived to cast his vote."
"Bitter much?" Kani rolled her eyes.
"He's running against everything my dad spent his life building," Ben retorted.
"He's just doing what he thinks is right. It's not like he's deliberately trying to be evil."
"Yes, Master Klin-Fa," Ben said sarcastically.
"Not my fault I stay awake through her lessons and you don't."
"It's just….everyone's doing something. Making a difference. Can we really afford to just lie here and spy on press-conferences? There has to be something we can do."
"We're eleven."
"Yeah, about the same age Cousin Anakin and Tahiri freed a bazillion Massassi souls from an ancient Sith trap. About the same age as Cousin Jacen and Jaina were when they took on a corrupt Corellian government. Heck, even my mom was learning how to be the Emperor's minion when she was our age."
"That last one isn't exactly a good thing…wait, what are you doing?"
Ben had pulled out his portable HoloNet receiver and was flicking through several channels. "Nope, nope, still nothing, fluff, talking-heads, nothing…okay! I have an idea."
"Now here's the part I start backing away and pretend that I don't know you," Kani said sarcastically. "Your last idea got you grounded and forbidden from seeking anything life-threatening for forever."
"But we helped out the war-effort by giving the Denon Jedi an 'in' with the Killik Hive and probably helped save that fleet my cousins are commanding. Besides, this isn't life threatening, trust me."
"Uh huh." Kani sat up, folding her arms in front of her and raising a golden eyebrow in a way all girls her age seem to master.
"Here, flip through all the local news networks and tell me what's missing." Ben handed his receiver over to her.
Skeptically, Kani humored her friend and did as told. "Okay, you've lost me."
"The war with the Killiks," Ben said blankly.
"Multiple outlets reference it," Kani shook her head.
"What *exactly* are they saying?" Ben pressed. "After all the initial hype and fuss about Anakin taking a kick-butt fleet to the Outer Rim, what are the outlets saying now?"
"Just that fighting is continuing in the Outer Rim," Kani shrugged, still not seeing the point.

"Uh huh, and what about that fighting. Any details? Deaths? Victories? *Anything* else besides a quick mention of a war against space-bugs?"
"Well, no. But I don't see how we can do anything about that. That's hundreds of thousands of lightyears away."
"If I remember correctly, Anakin took a bunch of reporters with him out there. Why aren't those reporters reporting?"
"Okay," Kani exhaled slowly, eyes darting skywards. "Skywalker, what's this idea of yours?"
"I give an interview or so drawing attention to that fighting out there," Ben said perkily.
"You hate interviews," Kani deadpanned.
"But it's me," Ben smiled. "I don't think any station is going to squelch a rare interview given by my amazing self."
"Ego alert," Kani poked at his forehead. "Too big. Besides, what makes you think that that will work? If the war isn't being focused on for military reasons, you'd be ending up in a steaming pile of bantha doo."
"That's just part one of the plan."
"Your plan has more than one part?" Kani groaned. "That's like worse to infinity. The last time you had a multi-step plan we stumbled into the Ysanna and nearly got sacrificed in an arcane Sith ritual."
"But we didn't," Ben said, wagging a finger at her. "That's the important part. Besides your plan to get us out of that ritual involved us being stranded on a rock in the middle of a lava stream."
"How was I supposed to know that the rocks were that brittle?"
"Using the Force, which you weren't at that time."
"Neither were you," Kani rolled her eyes. "Never mind that. What's this other half of the plan?"
"Use the Skywalker name to find out what happened to all those reports the reporters were supposed to have been making. Media black-outs are one thing, but this is ridiculous. It's been five months since the fighting started and we haven't heard anything from them."
"So just us against a government cover-up then?" Kani said sarcastically. "You said this wouldn't be life-threatening."
"It's not."
"And when your mom finds out…"
"Well, I took the blame for the last crazy plan of ours, can you take the blame for this one. You know mom likes you."
"Uh huh," Kani sighed, giving Ben a playful shove. "Fine. So, first step was…never mind." The moment she had said 'fine', Ben had leaped from the catwalk towards the cluster of HoloNet reporters that had gathered around a smiling Hamner. To no one in particular, Kani just

hung her head and placed a hand over her face. "Why am I his best friend again?"
Ben landed with a small rush of air, and silence immediately followed as the reporters' brains tried to catch up with what had just happened. Beaming, with the lights of so many cameras and the gazes of so many startled eyes on him, Ben offered them all a two-fingered salute. "Hello there."
All at once, the press recovered from their collective shell-shock and turned their focus from an equally stunned Hamner to the eleven-year old Skywalker. A deafening roar of questions followed as holocam droids jockeyed for position around the smaller figure. Ben grimaced, using the Force to create a small bubble around him that literally pushed everyone around back a step. Another figure dropped down to his side, giving him a sidelong eye-roll amid the barrage of questions.
"I know, I know, you don't have to say it," Ben grumbled.
"You certainly are fearless….and brainless," Kani said wryly.
"I said you didn't have to say it."
Kani then clapped her hands twice, the Force making them seem like cannons were going off. Immediately, the crowd quieted. Smiling sarcastically at her best friend, Kani tilted her head. "All yours, Skywalker."
Ben stuck his tongue out at her, then, remembering he was the focus of a dozen holo-cams, blushed and tried to formulate some speech. Instead, all that came out was an embarrassing cracking of his voice as he tried to say 'Hi.'
"Ben Skywalker, what do you think of your father's name on the ballot? Do you think he'll want to be Grandmaster even if he is chosen again?"
"Not here to talk about that," Ben shook his head.
The press looked at each other in confusion, not quite sure what to make of that comment.
Ben quickly came up with the words he wanted, silently thanking the Force as he did. He waved cheerfully. "Just wanted to say 'hi' to my cousins out in the Unknown Regions fighting against impossible odds against a Killik force that's many times bigger than the fleet they have. It's been ages since I heard word of anything that's happening out there, so I figured, if you're watching this, keep up the good work you three."
"Very close to your cousins?" quick-minded reporter Madhi Vaandt asked.
"Yeah, more or less. Grew up hearing all about them, and Jacen's even taught me a few things in his spare time. When they left with all their holo-reporters, I thought I'd be getting blow-by-blow plays of what's

happening out there. Speaking of, you guys are all reporters, right? Know why nothing's being transmitted?"
Ben felt several things in the Force at once, and out of the corner of his eyes, could see Hamner make an abortive step towards him.
"That's a good question," Madhi said. "I'm sure our station will look into it and get back to you. Do you mind if you answer a few questions about the elections now?"
"Sorry," Ben shook his head and began walking back towards the temple with another wave. "Trying to stay out of politics. Too confusing for a kid like me."
-)[-VII-](-
"Do I have to lock you in your room?"
Ben grimaced at the sound of his mother's voice and froze in his tracks. "Record timing, mom. Did they broadcast that already?"
"It was streaming live," Mara said wryly.
"It was my idea, Ms. Skywalker," Kani quickly spoke up. "You know me, always wanting to learn more about what's happening in this galaxy. Got a little miffed when I wasn't hearing anything from the…."
"You can stop right there, Kani," Mara held out a hand. "I have a background in intelligence, worked for a very smart but evil man, and even helped out Karde. Do you really think a pair of eleven year olds can pull one over on me?"
Kani smiled sheepishly and looked to her friend. "I tried."
"Thanks," Ben said faintly, unable to meet his mom's eyes.
"You going to tell me what that whole thing was about?"
Ben finally looked up. "Just trying to help. My cousins are out there fighting for everyone, and it's like the entire galaxy has forgotten that the war with the Killiks is still going on. Even the new Chief of State barely mentions it, and talks instead about a brighter future. And don't tell me that everything will work out. They may be on the other side of the galaxy, but the deaths of Jedi out there keep echoing in the Force like some bad reverb. How many have we felt die already? And Anakin didn't have that many fully trained Jedi with him to begin with."
"So you thought by drawing attention to it, you'd help them somehow?"
"At the very least open the galaxy's eyes to the war still being fought for them," Ben nodded.
Mara pursed her lips for a moment, then inclined her head. "Come with me, Ben. You too, Kani."
"I dragged her along," Ben said in her defense.
"Neither of you are in trouble," Mara replied, rolling her eyes. "I just want to show you two something."

Blinking in confusion, both Kani and Ben followed Mara out of the room and towards the deeper recesses of the Denon Temple.
"Where are we…"
"Just follow," Mara said, stopping at a turbolift. She gestured for the two to enter, then followed them in. At the key-pad for the destinations, however, instead of pressing one button, she pressed several in a deliberate pattern. A panel lowered, and took a scan of her eyes. The lift then started silently, descending downwards.
Ben and Kani exchanged clueless shrugs, watching as the floor-level display blinked past the basement level to a level neither realized existed.
"This is the nerve-center of the Temple," Mara introduced steadily. "Upstairs we introduce the general public to the Jedi Order, train younger Jedi and potentiates. Down here, only those with the proper security clearance or trust of the High Council are allowed access. Jedi Order military operations and communications are coordinated from here."
"Even the stuff from the Unknown Regions?"
"Couriers relay any transmissions Anakin and the others send, yes," Mara spoke. Her expressionless face caused Ben to fall quiet again. He could feel nothing emanating from his mom, no emotions outside a façade of calm.
The lift door opened after several longer seconds, and the silence of the lift was suddenly replaced by a cacophony of voices, metallic sounds of different droids, and computerized beeps.
"Master Skywalker," Jaden Korr, a fresh bacta patch covering one side of his face and an arm in a sling, looked up. "This is a…." He noted the two younger Jedi. "Surprise."
"Giving them some field experience," Mara said flatly. "How's the wounds?"
"Recovering the old-fashioned way, saving the bacta for the less gifted," Jaden remarked. "Any field in particular?"
"Do you have the latest dispatches from the Unknown Region campaign?"
"Cluster Aurek," Jaden gestured to a bank of computers surrounded by Jedi and military personnel. "But Master Skywalker, the content of those dispatches…those two are kids."
"Trying to be grown-ups," Mara said with a nod. "Ben, Kani, follow me. Don't say or touch anything unless I tell you to."
"There's a lot of people in this room," Ben breathed, wide-eyed gaze sweeping back and forth.

"What happened to not saying anything," Mara muttered. "This room is currently relaying information from five different campaigns. Not all the Killiks left for the Unknown Regions. The Killiks that had taken the Ssi-Ruuvi Imperium for example are currently occupying the Bakuran Hegemony. One of the reasons why they couldn't send any ships to aid Anakin. It was kept out of the news, however, because the Hegemony had been one of the most stable corners of the galaxy during these dark times, and any hint that it might fall to the Killiks will ruin many, many governments and economies throughout the galaxy. "
Ben and Kani stared at the team of six working a particular cluster of computers. With their Force-sensitive hearing, they could make out some of what was being said.
"Bakuran Command, be advised, the P'w'eck frigate Rwoch is under heavy fire in the Rattatak system. Intel reports from the Jedi Order suggest this is the start of the Killik incursion we were expecting."
"Jedi Central, this is Bakuran Command, we copy. Our short-range communications are being jammed at the moment. Requesting assistance from the Jedi Order task-force on station. We'll get the word out to our forces by courier ships if we have to."
"Central copies. Jedi Master Dekim, are your forces in position to engage?"
"This is Kirk, negative on that. My fleet group is already engaged. It's a two-pronged assault. I think the Killiks are making a push for the Force-sensitives on Bunduki. One moment. Admiral Irenez, the Killiks are using the moon as cover, call our fighters back! Anyways, Central, we're tied up here. I was about to call in Tensh's group for reinforcements, but it sounds like you need them all more."
"Appreciated, Jedi Knight Dekim, good luck and may the Force be with you."
Realizing they were falling behind, Ben and Kani quickly hurried to catch up to Mara. The elder Skywalker resumed talking as if there hadn't been any pauses. "A Galactic Alliance force headed by Master Madurrin and an element of Fifth Fleet is engaging a massive Killik fleet in the Suarbi system trying to keep the Jensaarai from being Joined. The granary-planet of the Outer Rim, Cerea is also under a full-scale assault."
"How come we haven't heard about any of this?" Kani voiced in disbelief.
"Cerea is a key planet in the Bakuran Hegemony, providing a tenth of their foodstores. The Suarbi system is allied with the Jedi Order. Should the galaxy learn that we are within a defeat of losing either, their

confidence in Hamner's administration will wane. That is something we can't afford. Not after the disasters of the Omas Administration."
"But to hide the truth from people," Ben frowned.
"Would you rather know that Denon, heart of this government, has a nest of Killiks still living in its undercity? Or go about your day blissfully ignorant of the fact that people-eating insects who tried to take over the planet are right below your feet? Sometimes knowing something can do more harm than good."
"The Bakuran Hegemony is one campaign, I'm assuming the Outer Rim is another?" Kani said.
"Yes. There is also action being taken against a particularly resurgent group of pirates in the Tion Hegemony. A peace-keeping mission protecting the largest Yuuzhan Vong colony in the Mid Rim, Ylix, from reprisals. If that colony fails, restoration efforts of Ithor fail with it. The last of the five theaters so far are Core and Inner-Rim operations. But that's not why we're here."
They stopped at the busiest area in the room. Several rows of computers were set up, in addition to holo-maps, starcharts, rosters, and a whole host of other glowing devices. Holo-emitters in one area were lit up with different faces relaying information with an almost desperate air.
"Master Skywalker," a man in military clothing and bearing saluted, the lightsaber in his belt jostling as he did.
"At ease, Pavan," Mara said. "Kids, this is Captain Tarak Pavan of Galactic Alliance Intelligence. Captain, Ben Skywalker, Kani Asari."
"Captain? You're not a Jedi?" Kani asked curiously, feeling no connection to the Force from the man despite the lightsaber at his side.
The officer smiled faintly. "I was adopted. My father found me on one of his cases when I was just a baby, told me he named me after a best friend of his. The saber belongs to him, but I wear it here so I can blend in with the other folks. Master Skywalker, we weren't expecting you for another few hours."
"Yeah, the Force works in mysterious ways," Mara drawled. "Did the latest comm-dispatches arrive yet?"
"Just in, ma'am. But we haven't had time to fully go through them. They're still fighting out there, that's all I can say."
"Let's have these kids help out then."
"Ma'am? You do know the contents of some of these dispatches…"
"I understand your hesitation," Mara said evenly. "They can take it."
"As you say."

Mara gestured to the side of the computers where a small table stained with old puddles of caf sat. "Draw up a chair you two. You'll be helping these data-miners mine."
Still not quite understanding what was happening, both the young Jedi grabbed a plastisteel chair and pulled it up to the table. Mara joined them and handed them a datapad each. "Kani, Ben, the both of you have mail duty. Your first job is to scan through it and black out anything that refers to location, troop strength, or anything military value. Don't worry if you miss something, the letters are checked three more times after. Then you sort the mail based on the destination, system, planet, city if possible. Be warned that condolence letters are included."
"Are there a lot of them?" Kani asked in a subdued voice.
Mara held the gazes of the two children. "One of the main reasons why the information has been kept out of the media is because of exactly that. The people don't want to hear about a war that's chewing up their sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, what have you. Especially since the government doesn't have the forces to send any more reinforcements to back those soldier up. You want the cold, hard truth, Ben? Five months into the war, Anakin Solo has lost a great deal of his people and ships. He's already sent us contingency plans should his forces be unable to hold off the Killik threat. The situation is far from the rosy picture Hamner paints, but that picture is what the galaxy wants to see. Wants to believe in. Without it, even if Anakin does win out there, there might not be a Galactic Alliance left to return to."
"A lie." Ben said in surprise.
"A necessary one when the alternative is chaos," Mara replied. "Start going through those letters. When you're done or have had enough, let me know and we'll leave."
Ben swallowed heavily, now feeling worry, concern, escape his mom's emotional shields. "Mom…I'm sorry…I didn't know."
"Don't apologize. In some ways, the people do need to know about the fighting so they can care about it. The danger comes when that care turns into worry and fear."
"So the peace they're enjoying is a lie then?" Ben murmured.
"For the general public, it's life as usual. A conflict in a distant system in a place they'll never see in their whole lifetime. To them, the names you see on those condolence letters are just numbers, someone from somewhere who died doing something. I bet most of the common folks won't even be able to point out the Chiss territories on a map. But for them, it's peace. True peace. Only when it starts to impact their

everyday life will they be worried. Some systems are feeling it more than others. But in the end, it's still peace. Does it matter if it's true peace or not?"
"It's wrong," Kani voiced.
"It's what the galaxy needs to stay in balance," Mara said, though acknowledging Kani by nodding. "At least until the Jedi have the strength to do the job without such deception."
"And the Chief of State wants the Jedi to be more involved?"
"Hey, I didn't vote for the guy," Mara said with a tired smile. "But he does know his politics. And right now he has the galaxy poised for a new era. He can't afford to give them more of the status quo. I'm not doing this to punish you guys. But if you're in such a hurry to grow up and help out, you should see the consequences of what happens first. If, afterwards, you still want to pitch in, tell me, and I think I can work something out. If you want to keep being kids after, though, that's fine to. The galaxy is a big place, you'll have your time, I can guarantee that."
-)[-VIII-](-
"There you are. I've been looking all over for you, Mr. Hermit." Jedi Master Kyle Katarn's voice shook Luke from his thoughts. "Thought you might want to know, the votes are in."
Luke looked up from the datapads he had been pouring over. "Votes?"
"The vote for the next Grandmaster, the one you wanted to happen after the Chief of State elections." Kyle blinked. "You okay?"
"Feeling old," Luke smiled faintly, rubbing his eyes and setting the datapad in his hand down. "And, who did the Order decide to call Grandmaster now?"
"Look at the results yourself, Grandmaster," Kyle said wryly, flipping Luke another datapad.
Luke caught the datapad, then blinked at Kyle's words. "I must have misheard you."
"Just look. You won by a landslide." Kyle said. "Saba, Octa, and Barratk'l all pushed for you to be re-elected. They might not agree with your decisions, but you're the only one the rest of the Order has confidence in. Heck, your niece and nephews are out fighting a war most of the galaxy is completely clueless about. You *founded* this iteration of the Order."
"I…I don't understand," Luke scratched the back of his head in bewilderment.
"Neither do I, but I think a wrinkly green Jedi Master might say something cryptic about it being the will of the Force," Kyle rolled his eyes. "Those of the Order not occupied with the war are waiting for

your acceptance speech, Grandmaster. Though, it's okay if you need time to make one. We Jedi are supposed to be very patient people."
Luke couldn't help but laugh, shaking his head in disbelief as he glanced again at the final tally. Hope once again bloomed in his heart. He had feared that the Order had lost its way, had become something he could no longer fix. But apparently they were willing to give him a second chance.
The comm-unit on his desk chimed. Luke activated it and wasn't exactly surprised as the Chief of State's image flickered into existence. "*Congratulations, Master Skywalker*."
"Thank you, Chief of State," Luke said politely. "I hope we can work together to help return stability to this galaxy."
"*As do I. Despite my political maneuverings, I **am** still a Jedi at heart. I want what's best for this galaxy. Want it whole, hale, and hearty. I too hope that you can work with me in making that dream a reality.*"
"Time will tell," Luke inclined his head a fraction. "Was there something I could do for you?"
"*Not at this time. This is your moment. Go address the Jedi Order. An old direction, a new one, I'm curious as to what your plans are.*"
"Work with *me*, Chief of State, and we can ensure the Jedi Order remains strong and capable of helping this galaxy out," Luke said in turn. "My goal for the Jedi Order is as it always has been. To develop and grow from the ideals the Orders of the past have been founded on. Even if you do not believe me, I want both a strong Jedi Order and a strong Galactic Alliance. We can have both without weakening either."
"*As you said, Master Skywalker, time will tell. When your niece and nephews return from their campaign victorious, you and I will be in a position to usher in a brighter future for the galaxy as a whole.*"
"I look forward to working with you in that regard, Kenth."
"*And I you. May the Force be with us*."
-)[-Chapter End-](-

Unknown Regions
-)[-I-](-
Jaina Solo spat out blood as she picked herself off the ground. The emergency shielding had held, but the *Megador*'s bridge was a shattered wreck with most of its crew dead. Glancing out the flickering forcefield keeping the void of space out, she could see multiple fires across the massive triangle prow of the ship.
"Guess I'm not getting my security deposit back," Jaina muttered, pulling herself up using a plasteel chair for support. "Anyone able to give me a report?"

There was movement by one of the consoles, and a Chiss officer reached over to look at the readout. "From the datastreams, most of the damage to the ship, save for the direct hit to the bridge, is superficial."
"Oh, good," Jaina grimaced as she put her weight on one of her wrists and her wrist sent a bolt of pain through her arm in response. "The battle?"
"One moment," another officer breathed, clutching his side. "Sensors show the Killiks in full retreat. The rest of our fleet is in a holding position around our vessel."
"Receiving communications from the *Rhysode*."
"Patch it through," Jaina started to gesture to the holo-emitter, but saw that a support beam had fallen on the device and crushed it to tiny bits and pieces. "Never mind, route it to my office, I'll take it there."
"Errr…ma'am," one of the other survivors pointed in the direction of her office. Instead of a door, there was now the tell-tale flickering of a mag-con field protecting the rest of the bridge from the giant hole in the side of it.
Jaina just hung her head. "And I was getting used to that room too. Send it to the secondary command room. I'll be down there if anyone needs me. In the meantime, initiate repairs, tend to the wounded, and so on."
Jaina began the relatively long trip to the secondary bridge, located at the heart of the Super Star Destroyer and otherwise a very good distance away from the primary bridge. Of course, since it was a Super Star Destroyer, it took even a Jedi of Jaina's caliber nearly thirty minutes to get to it. Not helping any was the fact that the turbolift tubes from the conning tower were badly damaged, meaning Jaina had to literally climb through a mess of mangled metal and sparking wires —all while injured.
By the time she had reached the secondary bridge, her hair was in disarray, and she was just about overdosing on the Force to numb her pain.
"*Solo,*" Rahm Marek quirked an eyebrow at her disheveled state.
"Not a word, Marek," Jaina muttered.
"*You'll be pleased to know that the Rhysode has retrieved Sivan Draco and the others of the strike team. They suffered five losses*."
"Okay, and everyone else? Our long-range sensors are out, as are several other detection systems. All we can see from our ship is that the Killiks have quit the field."
"*Pretty much. We believe Welk used that collision maneuver to save the other vessels in his fleet*."

"That was one hell of a distraction," Jaina sighed, shaking her head. She'd never understand Joiner logic, nor did she want to. "Where did they go?"
"*Trajectory has them heading for Ilum*."
"Little Brother must have gotten Welk's attention then," Jaina exhaled. "Any Killiks left on Geroon?"
"*Sensors show almost five million life-signs that weren't present before,"* Rahm nodded*. "The fleet is awaiting your orders*."
"Is the parasite bomb still active?"
"*Yes, a vast majority of the Killiks that jumped to hyperspace were infected*."
"Then it's done its job. Position the fleet and raze Geroon," Jaina said firmly.
"*Ambassador?*" one of Rahm's blond eyebrows rose a fraction.
"It's either we kill them quickly or let the parasite bomb slowly dissolve them. And since I highly doubt that the Chiss took the time to make an antidote, I prefer a mercy killing."
"*You have a point*," Rahm said.
"You sound reluctant, what's wrong?"
"I *just...are Jedi supposed to be ordering an orbital bombardment of a defenseless sentient species*?"
Jaina released a slow breath, rubbing at her eyes. "Good Jedi, no. But look at this another way. If these Killiks somehow overcome the parasite attack and survive, they'll have a stronghold in Vagaari space right on the door of the Imperial Remnant. It takes them a year to make a million or more soldiers. I'd rather we nip this future threat in the bud than deal with them later."
"*And this is different to the Vagaari executing the Taat hive, how*?" Rahm asked.
"Those bugs surrendered, were actually going to help us. These bugs still would kill and try to Join us without a second thought. These bugs don't know the meaning of surrender, only destruction. So we will communicate to them the only way they know."
"*Understood. I'll pass the word along. It will take several hours to position the fleet though. If you change your mind, let me know*."
Jaina nodded once. "Thank you, *Megador,* out."
When Rahm's hologram faded away, Jaina felt a sudden surge of tiredness and sat back in the chair nearest to her. It was hard for her to believe that they had survived nearly five months against the seemingly unstoppable Killik fleet.
Well, not everyone had survived.

She felt the glaring absence of one of her oldest friends in the Force, but she couldn't afford to let any tears fall. Even alone in the secondary command center, she couldn't afford to let that pain, let the knowledge of that void within, affect her. She was a sword, a weapon, and as the fleet positioned themselves over Geroon per her orders, she would bring an end to those that threatened the lives of so many.
Her breathing was almost unnaturally calm as she purged herself of emotions a warrior like herself couldn't afford to feel during a time of war. A sword could not be soft. A sword's core, whether it was a lightsaber or vibroblade, had to be strong.
"*Ma'am*," a voice called over the intercom.
"Go ahead," Jaina said emotionlessly.
"*Ma'am…I…we just got word that the Eternal Dynast was lost*."
Jaina froze in her chair, her breath coming out in quicker as her heart began to pound. "'Lost'?"
"*Yes ma'am. Survivors from the force trying to hold the Utegetu Nebula have just dropped out of hyperspace. The Killik forces massed and overwhelmed both General Antilles' and Moff Fel's fleet. Ma'am…only a couple of fighter squadrons and a lone frigate made it out. The status of General Antilles and Moff Fel are unknown*."
Jaina tried to reign in the emotional spike that jabbed at her heart. "That is inconsequential now. Have what ships that aren't taking part in the bombardment of Geroon to form up. Have a shuttle ready for me as well, I will be transferring my flag while the *Megador* undergoes repairs."
"*Ma'am*?"
Swallowing her emotions, Jaina oriented her mind to its tactical side. "Both my brothers are occupied over Ilum and we can ill-afford to have another Killik force intervene. Especially if the survivors of this battle are already en route. What we have to do is intercept the Utegetu Nebula Killik fleet before they have a chance to join up with the others. I highly doubt Moff Fel or General Antilles left much of them left, but we cannot allow them to regroup."
"*Yes, ma'am. A shuttle will be standing by. Good luck.*"
Jaina emerged from the secondary command center just as the replacement crew of officers and techs began entering it. She made eye-contact with the ranking officer. "Tell Admiral Reige that he's in charge of the fleet. For Geroon, he can fire when ready. That is all."
"Yes, ma'am," the lieutenant saluted sharply.
Jaina exited the room, not hurrying her gait in the slightest. If Jagged was dead, no amount of speed would bring him back. The thought caused Jaina's stomach to twist in knots. Since he wasn't a Jedi, the

Force was giving her no clear indications one way or another. She wasn't sure what was worst, instantly knowing that he had died in a blaze of Killik-created fire, or that sliver of hope that he had somehow survived despite the odds.
"I'll pilot the shuttle," Jaina dismissed the pilot waiting for her.
She barely waited for him to leave the Lambda-class vessel before starting it up. She tried to tell herself that she was taking a portion of the fleet to the Utegetu Nebula for tactical reasons. That she didn't give a womprat's ass about avenging or rescuing Jagged. But even as she denied it, she couldn't help but feel a grim source of satisfaction as she saw Loiric Kaan's fleet in the distance position themselves over Geroon. The bugs started the war, but the GA forces were definitely finishing it. As the ship coasted away from the *Megador*, Jaina rapidly scanned the report the survivors of the Utegetu Nebula had given.
"Assistant Syndic Nuruodu , do you copy?"
"*I do*."
"Were you briefed?"
"*Just now, yes*."
"You'll be with me for the Utegetu raid. The Chiss know that territory better than the others."
"*How many ships do you want me to bring? Most of the vessels are involved in the pacification of the Killiks on Geroon*."
"Only a handful or so given the numbers the survivors have reported," Jaina said. "This should be a mop-up operation."
"*The fleet-group should be ready by the time you are aboard*."
"Standard Chiss efficiency, love it," Jaina remarked. Her brown eyes stayed cold as she already envisioned dropping out of hyperspace in the nebula and blowing apart the remaining Killiks. She might have been a Jedi, but she was also human, and the human part of her was glad that the five-months of non-stop fighting and maneuvering were about to come to an end.
-)[-II-](-
Jacen smoothly docked his ship alongside the familiar profile of the *Falcon*, his emotions locked away for everyone's safety. He didn't have the time to worry about Tenel Ka, to grieve the death of a friend no matter how close, or rage over the pointless nature of the war Welk was fighting. He couldn't afford to think of the ramifications the war would have on the rest of the galaxy, or the inevitable darkness he had sensed on the horizon. Right now, the only thing he could do was focus on the matter at hand.
As sound as Anakin's plan was, Jacen had his doubts. He couldn't help it, as it was in his nature to prepare for the worst. When Lomi had been

removed from the Kind, there were still Killik hives in the Hapes Cluster who had continued to fight. When Raynar had been killed, yes the explosives didn't go off, but the Killiks on Denon had kept up a low-level insurgency and continued to try and Join its populations. The residual memories, the impressions Lomi and Raynar had left on the hives had persisted. And where their forces had been outgunned and overwhelmed by superior technology, Welk's forces currently had the upper hand. The GA forces couldn't afford to have those residual impressions prolong the conflict.
"Soooo, no welcoming committee," Nelani Dinn said nervously, descending the ramp of the freighter alongside her master, head looking left and right for any sign of the creepy-crawly things whose nest they had just entered.
"Would you rather start slogging through an army of bugs right away?" Nightsister Rena Lai said almost playfully, louder than most would think wise. It was as if she wanted everything on the asteroid to hear her.
"No," Nelani swallowed, eyeing the dark-sider distrustfully. It was bad enough that the asteroid-base they were on was flooded with the dark side, so much so that if it weren't for Jacen shielding her, Nelani knew she'd be a nervous wreck. But to actually work with dark Jedi went against everything she had read about.
"Pity, I would," Rena shrugged. Unlike Nelani's pale features, Rena's emaciated form seemed to shine with health in the darkness of the hangar bay.
"What's the plan of attack, Anakin?" Jacen looked to his brother, who was leaving the *Falcon*.
Anakin gestured to the dark caverns ahead. Evidently the Killiks could see in the dark just fine and didn't any source of lighting for their asteroid base. "We follow Welk's presence and take down anything he throws at us."
"No plan, then," Waxarn said dryly, his voice carrying into the darkness beyond. "You do realize that there are probably thousands of bugs on this thing?"
"You have a better one?" Anakin raised an eyebrow at him, seemingly rising to Waxarn's bait.
Despite the tone and words, much of what they were saying was all for show. A plan had been formed long before they had stepped foot on the asteroid, and a large part of it had to do with Welk biting on their discord. After all, the Welk of old knew Anakin as a reckless glory-hound who was quick to act and even quicker to sacrifice those with him. The Welk of old was influenced by Raynar's thoughts, a Raynar

who had lost Lusa, Eryl, and others before being Joined and was firmly blaming Anakin for it all. Anakin wasn't about to correct Welk's impression of him any time soon.
"*How certain are you that the Killiks will fall back with Welk's removal?" Kyp asked, holding Anakin's gaze on board the Sunrider's lounge.*
"Very," Anakin answered. "They stopped on Denon when I killed Raynar. The majority stopped at Hapes when you neutralized Lomi, and she wasn't even killed. If we remove Welk, the needs of the other Joiners will take the lead instead of his own."
"*And we know that Joiners severely influence the behavior of whatever hive they're Joined to," Damaya said. "We remove the last pillar that is Welk-Lomi-Raynar from the equation and the Killiks will have no drive to continue this war.*
"*There is one other thing though. Lomi."*
"Yeah?"
"How bad a loser is Welk?"
"Why do you ask?"
"If he starts losing, what are the chances he'll activate a self-destruct or use some desperation tactic to take everyone down with him?"
"He's a coward at heart," Lomi shook her head. "Afraid of death, of his own shadow. Back on Myrkr, why do you think we waited until you left us alone with Raynar to act? If my strength lays in doubts, his is in fear. It's how he's massacring your forces out there, amplifying their fears to freeze them in place. If he's losing, he'll do his best to throw you off by possibly bombarding the planet with all your friends on it. Dying is the last thing he wants."
"In other words, we take him out before he realizes we're winning," Waxarn summed up.
"Exactly," Lomi's mechanical voice held no emotion.
"First we got to get to the 'winning' part of the plan," Kyp said dryly, stretching his arms out. "Or maybe we can convince ourselves we're 'winning' right alongside Welk."
"We have two ships," Waxarn gestured. "Let's just get in them and use their lasers to blast a path all the way to Welk."
"And if, for some reason, he's hiding behind the reactors that power this place?" Anakin said. "Or if he sends his hordes of bug friends and they eat their way through our ships?"
"Hey, we want the guy dead or alive, right?" Rena chimed in. "Who cares if we hit the reactors?"
"The Force can do a lot of things," Lomi countered her fellow Nightsister. "If Welk uses the combined power of the life-forces on this asteroid, he might be able to survive and even feign his death. The

Killiks would still remain a threat and we'd have to look for him all over again. The only way to be sure he is neutralized is up close and personal, preferably with my lightsaber removing his head."
"He's your apprentice," Nelani protested, frowning at the dark Jedi Master. "What sort of sadistic murderer would ever even consider killing a student who trusts and looks up to them?"
"Oh sweetie," Lomi said patronizingly, the robotic lilt of her voice making her sound even less human. "There is so much you don't know about the Force, about the galaxy. Not everything exists in books and holocrons. Welk *was* my student, yes. So as a favor to him, I'm ending him before he ruins both our names."
Nelani shuddered, side-stepping towards Jacen involuntarily "That's just…wrong in so many ways. Shouldn't you be trying to save him? I mean, it kind of worked out for you."
"She is sooooo adorable," Rena Lai grinned toothily. "Such a pure and innocent and *Jedi*. I could just eat her up."
"Save your appetite for the bugs, sister," Quin drawled. "Besides, we promised Solo we wouldn't munch on any light-siders."
"Great, stuck on a dark and creepy dark-side drowned asteroid with insane people as allies," Nelani muttered, hugging herself. She looked to Jacen. "At least I have you here, Master."
Jacen smiled and patted her shoulder fondly. "Don't worry, I have your back."
"Getting back on task," Waxarn said. "We still have to get to Welk, and from what I'm sensing he's in the middle of this rock."
"Then we should get moving," Anakin said evenly, gesturing to the others. "Before the bugs finally decide to get over our indecision and attack."
The sound of hundreds of feet pounding the ground echoed through the many holes and passageways into the hangar. The thick hangar doors that led to the inner parts of the asteroid began slowly opening with a deafening creaking groan.
"Too late," Damaya spoke, eyes darting from one opening to another and then on the widening doorway.
"Okay then, Waxarn, we go back to your plan," Anakin said hastily.
"We what? That's an actual part of the plan?"
"Do *you* want to fight an army of bugs on foot or with starship lasers?" Anakin drawled.
"Nelani get to our ship and fire up the weapons," Jacen ordered swiftly.
"Kyp, Waxarn, Damaya, the *Falcon's* guns are yours, two with the quads, and one with the mini-turret." Anakin similarly barked out.
"What will the rest of you be doing?" Nelani asked.

"Trying to keep any extra bugs off the ships of course," Quin said, leaping into the air and activating his violet lightsaber.
"Having fun chopping bugs, baby brother," Rena added, her acidic yellow blade igniting and illuminating her slightly deranged grin.
"Keep busy, that way you know you're still living," Lomi added, her newly constructed red blade flashing to life.
Nelani looked dubiously at Jacen. "You sure your brother had the right idea bringing them along?"
"Nope," Jacen shrugged. "But we don't have any choice but to trust him now."
"Great," Nelani muttered to herself, hurrying into the freighter.
Outside, the dark-siders and two Solos formed a protective formation in front of their respective ships. The thundering stampede of Killiks didn't disappoint. A second later, all manner of bugs burst out from every opening. Assassin bugs, blaze and blast bugs, Killik warriors, Joined Verpine, Geonosian, and a variety of others. A horde of the Killiks rushed straight out the hangar door, like a living ocean wave.
The *Falcon*'s two quad turrets and the anti-personnel under-turret let loose a constant stream of deadly energy as fast as the systems could cycle. Nelani added her freighter's own twin laser cannons, strafing one opening after another. The living wave crashed straight into the torrent, temporarily halting under the withering barrage.
But Welk either didn't care, or was confident that he had the numbers to do the job. The swarm continued, the newly arrived fast outnumbering the recently blasted. The number of openings they emerged from outnumbering the number of turbolasers the defenders had available.
A larger Killik soldier hurled a spear directly at the *Falcon*'s top turret, the weapon creating spidering cracks on the cupola as it bounced off.
"Hey sleepy-heads out there!" Waxarn yelled, sending giant laser beams into the mass of bugs emerging from the ceiling.
"Kind of busy, Jedi," Rena chortled, flipping and spinning with almost unnatural flexibility around more thrown spears and fired projectiles. She twisted like some sort of spine-less being so that she was looking at Waxarn right-side-up between her legs. "You can come out here and help us if you want."
The audible crackle of Sith lightning was accompanied by Quin's almost maddened laughter. The youngest of the Nightclan members was sending stream after stream into the approaching horde, roasting bugs by the handful. Lomi, restricted by her robotic limbs, had resorted to throwing her lightsaber through swaths of bugs dropping in all

around her. The Dark Jedi Master seemed to have no trouble decapitating creatures she had once considered a part of her being. The turret on the underside of the *Falcon* was knocked out of commission by a well-aimed plasma bolt. Damaya quickly emerged from the ship to join the fray, her aggressive saber-style immediately pushing back a wall of Killiks.

Screeches and roars accompanied every fallen Killik, but Welk was not letting up. The sheer numbers of Killiks rushing the hangar was simply too much for the eight Force-users. For every one bug they took down, dozens more took its place. Spikes, blades, exploding projectiles, they were flying in a literal storm around the Force-users. Near misses cut the armored jumpsuits and exposed skin, with balls of fire peppering the group with debris on a near constant basis.

Sending out bolt of lightning after lightning with an increasingly wild look in his eyes, Quin didn't notice the assassin bug veer in towards him in a suicidal arc. With everyone else busy with their own mass of bugs, they nearly missed it as well.

Jacen caught the motion out of the corner of his eyes, however, and closed his eyes and concentrated, drawing on the combined strength of the Battle Meld. The Force coursed through him as he made contact with the vast consciousness of the Killik hive-mind.

A second later, there was a small pop of the bug breaking the sound-barrier—that went unheard in the din of the battle—and suddenly Quin convulsed, the back of his head erupting in a gory mess as the bug splattered itself against him at lethal speeds.

"NO!" The maniacal shriek that erupted from Rena as Quin collapsed to the ground was heard by all. It was no harmless shriek of rage and distress either. The Force roared out from her mouth and literally liquefied the organs of the beings it washed over. Whole squads of Killiks dropped dead in the blink of an eye. She spun around and delivered a similar shriek to another group of Killiks, leveling them in an instant. The Force spun around her in a feral cyclone, the Nightsister's eyes pitch black as the power her parents had valued burst forth without restraint.

"WAIT FOR ME BABY BROTHER!" Rena howled animalistically, the Force roaring unfettered and throwing all manner of debris around with its untamed pulses. Dust, rock, bodies, everything flew everywhere. Even the *Falcon* and Jacen's freighter were pushed back several meters by the sheer strength of Rena's aura.

"Shield your minds!" Lomi yelled out to the others, using the Force to get herself heard as she gripped onto a rocky outcropping..

"What?" Nelani placed her hands on the viewport, trying to see what was happening.
"Nelani, do as she says!" Jacen called out, looking over his shoulder for one long second. In that moment, a Joined grutchin spat out a corrosive stream of liquid that splashed against the side of the freighter and across the right side of Jacen's face. The Jedi Master gasped in agony, staggering as he did.
"Master!" Nelani targeted the offender and turned it into atoms.
"Shield yourself, like I taught you!" Jacen gritted out through the pain.
Rena Lai let out one last wild scream, the wild Force nexus swirling around her seemingly sucked into her body as her voice died away. It was as if all the air and sound had been siphoned out of the room for several long seconds. And then, as if it was released all at once, a powerful burst of Force exploded from the grieving Nightsister.
The blast of Force energy washed over everyone, friend and foe alike, leveling the battlefield in an instant.
Absolute silence followed, the thousands of Killiks that had swarmed into the hangar all lay motionless. The Force-using attackers equally still.
In the epicenter of the blaster, there was nothing left of Rena Lai save for her clothing, lightsaber, and a pile of ash.
-)[-III-](-
Anakin's strike team returned to consciousness only a few seconds later, using the Force to check on one and other. One thing they immediately noticed was Damaya, Rena and Quin's absences, and then memory of what had just happened came rushing back.
"Wow, that schutta actually managed it," Lomi chuckled wryly, lying on her back and staring up at the rocky ceiling.
"What was that?" Nelani breathed, staggering out of the ship she had been in. Being the only one not in on the plan Anakin and the others had in motion, her confusion was genuine and felt far and wide. "It feels like my head's going to explode at any moment."
"A Force weapon the Nightclans were developing for the eventual war with the Dayclans," Lomi answered back. "Rough translation of the name would be Rendering Thoughts. Smaller, more focused version of the Thought-Bomb you read about in your codeci. Pretty useless otherwise."
"You call this useless?" Kyp croaked, gesturing to the literal mat of Killik bodies all around them.
"In case you've forgotten Master Durron, we're Sith. Other people are supposed to do the sacrificing, not us. The whole dying-for-the-cause is

strictly a Jedi thing. The Nightmother would be horrified by Rena's actions."
All talk quieted as the group sensed Welk's approach.
Welk and the remaining army of homicidal insects he had at his disposal.
"Anyone care to blow themselves up to save the rest of us?" Lomi asked dryly, wearily pushing herself to her feet. "You Jedi are *so* good at sacrificing yourselves after all."
"We'll pass," Waxarn answered back, using the *Falcon*'s landing strut to aid in his own rise.
"You okay, Jacen?" Anakin asked softly, looking at his older brother. The Killik's corrosive spit eaten away at the right side of Jacen's face, leaving a very ghastly chemical burn in its wake.
"I've been better," Jacen croaked, eyes closed, part of his jaw-bone visible as he spoke. "Managed to neutralize the acid. Nasty stuff."
Anakin reached into his utility belt and pulled out a bacta patch. "Here."
Jacen waved his brother off. "Nothing a few hours of meditation and a dip in a bacta tank can't put back together."
"Sorry, master," Nelani said hoarsely. "If I had…"
"No apologies, Nelani. What happened has passed," Jacen opened his eyes, one his usual kind brown, the other blood-filled from whatever liquid had splashed on it. "We're still alive, aren't we?"
"Well, not all of us," Nelani looked to the remains of Quin and Damaya, briefly glancing at Rena's empty robes. "And Welk is on his way."
Jacen released a pained breath and called on the Force to augment his strength as he rose to his feet. "Saves us the effort of trying to find him in this place then. And I'm okay, Anakin, quit looking at me like that."
Anakin's smile was forced. "With me being in charge of this whole defense, and how poorly it has gone, I'm already standing on a mountain of bodies. I don't want to have to add yours to it any time soon."
"I know most of your planning is by-the-seat-of-your-pants," Jacen said, sensing that his brother was a lot more calm than he should be after losing three teammates. Jacen knew then that his brother had something up his sleeve. "Any idea what we're going to do when Welk gets here? We won't be able to fight off another army of Killiks."
"My head hurts just thinking about the Force," Kyp nodded grimly, looking pale and in desperate need of a good sleep. He glared balefully at Lomi. "Kind of figured that any weaponized-Force ability dark siders would think of would harm their allies too."

"Picky, picky," Lomi rolled her eyes. "You Jedi complain a lot. What's there to plan, Jedi Master Solo? Welk gets here, he blusters some nonsense, and then I stab my saber through his face."
"And the army of bugs he's bringing with him?" Waxarn asked with an arched eyebrow.
"Oh, then we die a heroic, glorious death befitting of your esteemed bloodlines."
"Pass again," Waxarn sighed.
"Ditto," Kyp nodded. "There's nothing esteemed about my bloodline."
"Think we should fall back?" Anakin looked to his brother as the others argued about the finer points of their lineage.
"We won't get another chance at this," Jacen shook his head. Silently he communicated a message to his brother. It was quick, wouldn't make sense to anyone else Force-sensitive and listening in, and was wrapped in emotions such as desperation and despair.
Anakin raised an eyebrow to show he understood, then looked to the others, seemingly exhausted and defeated. "I'm open to suggestions then,"
They heard a single pair of footsteps click along the route to the hangar, and the sounds of hundreds of mandibles clacking.
The walls of the hangar again appeared to come alive as Killiks poured out of the many vents, pipes, and other openings. But rather than rush the Jedi, they began to assemble all around the hangar. Perched on ledges, on the thick piping that ran across the ceiling of the hangar, clinging to the walls, wherever there was room, the bugs filled it up.
Through the open hangar door, as if buoyed by a living mat of Killiks, Welk appeared in all his Joined glory. Or what was left of Welk. A human torso was merged onto a set of Killik legs, four additional arms emerging out from the torso where no human or Dathmori had arms before. His two human arms were reinforced by a barbed exo-skeleton of some sort, his hands looking more like claws. Welk had the mandibles of a Killik soldier, his compound eyes bugging out from his still human head. Any of his human skin showing looked gray and molted, barely kept alive by the Force.
Surrounding the now three-meter tall former fallen Jedi was a nimbus of dark side energy. He was projecting fear with every step, terrors of the night, memories best left forgotten, all brought to the forefront of everyone's minds. As if his image wasn't nightmarish enough.
"Master," Nelani whimpered, her legs giving out as she blindly groped for Jacen's robes.
Jacen caught her and helped her back to her feet. "Wait in the ship, Nelani. This is as far as you go."

"But…"
"Go," Jacen said tenderly, leading her back to the ramp of the ship. "We'll be okay."
Nelani reluctantly obeyed, though she had little choice as the oppressive Force energy threatened to give her a nervous breakdown with every pulse. Climbing into the pilot's chair, Nelani placed a hand to the viewport and peered anxiously out at the unfolding drama.
"Damn, he's gotten ugly," Lomi muttered, her cybernetic eyes locked on her former apprentice.
"No kidding," Anakin muttered.
"We're not going to last long with that aura he's putting out," Waxarn said. "Not if we have to fight it off and fight him at the same time."
Anakin and Jacen exchanged mild glances, and in a second, both of their Force presences faded out.
"Wha…Blast it! Give a warning before you go all Vong next time," Kyp said, a hand on his chest.
"Great, he can't affect you two, but what about us?" Lomi said flatly.
"Only down side is that we can't use the Force on him either," Anakin remarked. "So you guys still are better off."
"He brought several hundred friends for you to play with," Jacen said, gesturing with his eyes to the legion of Killiks. "I highly doubt he brought them just so they could witness his victory."
"You severely overestimate how amazing I am," Kyp grumbled. "I'm a mere mortal you know."
The monstrosity that was Welk approached the group, entering the light given off by the *Falcon* and Jacen's transport. The fact that Welk's shirt appeared to be made of stitched together pieces of skin of various species didn't make Welk any more appealing.
"He got *really* ugly," Lomi said, recoiling.
"You should not have come here," Welk's crackly voice was devoid of emotion.
"Welk," Anakin stepped forward in front of his team. "Good to see you again."
At his words, the hundreds of Killiks in the room chattered in a way that couldn't be interpreted as anything *but* anger.
"Anakin." Welk said, his compound eyes focusing on the smaller Jedi in front of him.
"You remember me."
Welk's twisted face showed a fraction of emotion. "Of course! It is your fault we are like this!"

Welk held out his hand and a wave of Force energy burst from it. The energy, however, washed harmlessly over Anakin, rippling his clothing but doing nothing more.
"It's in the past now, Welk," Anakin said patiently. "It was partly my fault, yes. But also your own as well. No one told you and Lomi to steal the transport."
"We are Welk no longer!" Welk growled, the insects all around shifting at his changing mood. "We are Iesei, we are Aebea, we are Kolosolok, we are Taat, we are the Blood Herald of the Kind."
Anakin raised an eyebrow. "You were Joined to more than one hive?"
"It was Welk's wish," Welk answered, his emotions changing once more to impatience. "Welk wished to live, to be strong and never fear again. We did as Welk wished."
"What of Lomi and Raynar?"
"You destroyed them," Welk sneered as best as one could with mandibles. "We were the body, Raynar the mind, Lomi the will. We were in balance!"
The Killiks clicked with angry sympathy, their compound eyes glaring down at the Jedi.
"Errr…Anakin, please avoid ticking off the giant king bug," Kyp muttered. "Unlike you and Jacen, not all of us can turn Vong at the flip of a switch, and Welk's aura of fear is a tad bit annoying."
"Stop this now, one who was Welk," Anakin said. "No more of the Kind need to die today."
"It is your fault," Welk growled, straightening to an even taller height. "All your fault we are like this! Your fault that Raynar is dead, that Lomi was taken from the Kind. Your fault that the galaxy will burn!"
"All my fault?" Anakin's voice remained even as he held the Joiner's crazed glare. The Force lined all three words so that it was more of a command than a question.
"Yes, and you will pay dearly for it. You who have made the light too bright, who has stirred the sleeping darkness, destroyer of systems, harbinger of doom, She-Who-Births-the-Razer-of-Worlds. You who is arrogant enough to think that you know what is best for all when the billions of minds in the Kind see differently. You, Anakin Solo, who should have died on Myrkr and thus leave the timeline unaltered, but live and have unlocked one key to *her* prison."
"That's crazy," Jacen spoke up, leaving their script for a moment. "The Force is never certain, so why do you say he should have died on Myrkr?"
Multifaceted eyes turned towards the older Solo. "With the Force opened up to us thanks to the Joining of so many able Force-users, we

can *see* what was, is, will be. We can see what should have been and what needs to be. You have brought about the rise of the darkness a hundred years early, stirred more threats than the galaxy can take. You have doomed everyone in the galaxy with your belief that you were meant to save them."
"If it is all my fault," Anakin drew and activated his lightsaber, seizing control of the conversation once more. "Then I challenge you, Blood Herald of the Kind, to make things right. If the Force is truly on your side, and I am meant to be dead, then does it not fall upon you to do its bidding? Just you, the Blood Herald of the Kind against me, the source of all your grief."
Jacen's good eye darted to Anakin in mock surprise. "Ana…"
"I've got this Jace," Anakin said with a faint smile.
"But…."
"Hey, it's me."
Welk did not take the challenge well. He roared a tremendous roar that seemed to echo infinitely through the asteroid they were on. Each of his limbs reached and pulled off a cylindrical object off the main torso of the three-meter tall creature. Though made of the same material as a Killik shell, they were unmistakable for what they were. There was a pause as Welk's compound eyes bore in to Anakin's determined blue. Then all six lightsabers activated at once, vibrant gold blades crackling with unstable streams of energy illuminating the hangar.
"Sure you don't need my help?" Jacen said wryly.
"I'll be fine," Anakin said reassuringly.
"Know this, Anakin," Welk said, his voice returning to a monotonous drone. "As you lay dying, the Kind shall feast on your brother, on those you have brought with you to join in your sacrifice. With your death, the galaxy shall return to its dimmer state, and *her* eyes will close again."
"And if should win? What does that say about what the Kind believes?"
"You will not win, you-who-should-be-dead."
"We'll see," Anakin said, the red blade of his own lightsaber shining against the gold. "Everyone else, don't interfere, not even to lend me your strength."
"Cocky, aren't you?" Waxarn sighed, shaking his head.
"No, if you help out, Welk is going to have his friends help out. He has more of them than you."
"What about that little bit of not letting him realize he's about to lose," Kyp muttered.
"And you promised I could kill him," Lomi protested for an entirely different reason.

"He's still alive," Anakin said to Lomi. And then to Kyp, "Don't worry I know how to win while losing."
"Not sure if that's supposed to be reassuring," Kyp grumbled.
"Enough," Welk brandished his sabers. "Do we fight?
"Yes," Anakin brought his saber back up, and then leaped into the air over Welk. Landing with his back towards the hangar door, Anakin gestured with his free hand. "We fight."
-)[-IV-](-
Jaina's face was impassive as the announcement that they were about to drop out of hyperspace came out from the bridge-pit. She had had several hours of travel for her mind to think of the various permutations that might greet their fleet. None of them included Jagged's survival. She was a sword, couldn't afford to give herself false hope. The only thing she had was the facts given to her by the survivors of the rear-guard. That at the time of their retreat both General Antilles' and Moff Fel's flags had been knocked out of the fight. That the survivors were the only ones who had made it out.
Not even considering that Jagged would have survived such an onslaught, Jaina's full focus was on keeping the Killiks from advancing. Keeping them from interrupting Anakin's plans over Ilum. She'd have time to grieve, to yell, to break things, later.
"Prepare to launch fighters," Assistant Syndic Irolia intoned from next to Jaina. "And ready the interdictor fields."
Jaina heard the acknowledgment as if the voice was far away, her gaze focused on the blue tunnel outside the bridge window. As the countdown to reversion neared zero, one of Jaina's hands curled into a fist. Of Anakin, Jacen, and herself, she had the most tactical of minds. She knew that Anakin was an expert at manipulating the big picture and Jacen an expert at the small. But she, she could do both, maybe not to the same degree as her brothers, but able enough to make experienced commanders like Tsavong Lah fall for her plans. All she needed was to focus, to not let her emotions get in the way. She was a sword after all, master of defense and offense. The Force was her ally, guiding her thoughts and helping her discern the immediate future.
"Keep the fighters in until I give the order," Jaina countermanded.
"Jaina?" Irolia said in a low voice. "The dartfighers will…"
"Won't be launched," Jaina shook her head. "The Killiks are single-minded in purpose. They won't stop to engage us, even if we yank them out of hyperspace. Their ships are also faster than ours sublight."
"Hyperspace reversion in two…hyperspace reversion in one…" the propulsion officer counted down.

At zero, the fleet of five Chiss Star Destroyers and their supporting vessels emerged from the blue realm of hyperspace. Immediately the two interdictor vessels began pulsing out their gravity fields, the Star Destroyers flanking them in a protective formation.
"Long range sensors picking up hyperspace distortions!"
"Concentrate fire on their engines," Jaina ordered with supernatural calm. "Have the frigates and corvettes take the lead on the attack, keep the Star Destroyers back."
"Sir," the comm-officer nodded. A few minutes later, the light-attack vessels surged forward ahead of the other ships.
"I hope you know what you're doing," Irolia murmured. "Against heavy cruisers, they won't stand a chance."
A wave of Force energy washed over the bridge.
The profound sense of dread, that she was making the biggest mistake in her life, washed over Jaina. From the abject terror in the eyes of the others on board, she wasn't the only one. Jaina reached out with the Force and sent out an angry pulse of her own, restoring order on their bridge.
"Ma'am! Several of our frigates are painting the interdictors with firing locks! Several more are firing on each other!"
"What?" Irolia managed, still shaking her head to clear the cobwebs.
"Move the ship between us and them," Jaina directed in Irolia's stead. "The Force is currently making the crews panic."
"We're being hailed."
"Ig…"
"*Get out of the way! We have to get out of here! We're going to die! Move! Move! Move!*" the chaotic screams filled the channels before Jaina could tune them out.
"Captain, this is Jedi Knight Jaina Solo, stand down!"
"They're firing on us! Orders!?"
"Disable them," Jaina barked.
"Roger, gunnery-crews, target engines and weapons only."
A group of three frigates continued to barrel towards the Chiss Star Destroyer, their lasers opening up in a flurry of green. In turn, the Star Destroyer's turbolaser batteries fired back.
"Killik fleet has been pulled out of hyperspace!" The announcement was followed by a giant cluster of ovaloid and non-uniform-shaped vessels being dragged out of hyperspace in a flash. Many were heavily damaged or showing signs of battle, and the few unscathed vessels were leading the attack. The numbers were about equal to what Jaina had fielded, which should have meant an easy win for her forces.

But the crew of the Star Destroyer was dragged back to more immediate concerns when one of the firing frigates suddenly disappeared in a ball of fire.
"I said disable!" Jaina yelled at the weapon's station.
"Ma'am, they lowered their shields just before our lasers hit."
"Suicide?" Irolia said in disbelief.
"Looks like…" a second frigate went up in flames. "…it."
The third frigate didn't even bother pulling up, choosing instead to ram into the prow of Irolia's flagship, blasting a hole through the nose of the triangular vessel.
"More deaths the Killiks have to answer for," Jaina cursed.
"Ma'am, whatever thing the Force is doing is still affecting our people. Only a third of our ships are in combat- readiness. We lost half our frigates and supporting vessels already."
"Distance to enemy ships?"
"Several hundred kilometers and closing."
"Tell what ships are ready to form up behind us," Jaina said. "Have the rest keep the interdictors safe. If they're not actively hunting the Killiks, the fear will be lessened."
"If the frigates had been the ones protecting the interdictors…" Irolia began in a low voice to Jaina. "Did you know that was going to happen?"
"No," Jaina answered. "The Force directed my actions. I just listened, even if it made no sense at the time. A couple things are clear though, there's another Force-sensitive in that Killik fleet."
"A couple?"
"That and Imperial Jedi Antalia Draco is on the same ship," Jaina released a breath. "And that means Jagged is alive as well."
"Moff Fel? Are you sure?"
"Not a hundred percent," Jaina shook her head. "In the meantime, give orders not to fire on that giant cruiser leading the Killik attack. I don't want to vaporize my Imperial Jedi by accident."
"Passing the orders on."
"All ships are entering firing range!"
Jaina gestured. "Launch fighters and fire at will."
-)[-V-](-
Syal Antilles was piloting a fighter that was currently on its fifth owner in the span of five months. Normally, pilots being a superstitious bunch, she wouldn't have touched the fighter. But just as the Chase-X had survived its last four pilots, she had outlived her last few fighters. In fact, getting spaced no longer had that panic-inducing thrill it once

had. But after piloting Eta-Fives and Aleph fighters—the racespeeders of the fighter world—a Chase-X was like driving a cargo truck.
"Survivor squad, stay together and follow my lead," Syal ordered evenly. "We've survived this long, don't get yourself killed looking for glory or revenge."
"*Roger Survivor Lead*."
Syal heard the acknowledgments and grit her teeth together as what was left of the Killik fleet came into view. Though they were badly battered, the Killiks just didn't seem to know the meaning of 'surrender'. It probably helped that the Joiner on board was using the Force to make everyone's movements sloppy and disorganized. She watched as two of the GA frigates narrowly avoided colliding as they swerved to avoid a missile barrage.
"*Lead, are you reading this right*?" her wingman, Tiom Rordan called out. "*The bugs aren't launching fighters*."
"I see it," Syal said in turn. "It looks like they're actually trying to run right through our forces."
"*That's suicidal!*" Another Survivor gasped.
"*Whoever said the bugs make any sort of sense*?" a more veteran pilot chimed in.
"Okay everyone, cut the chatter. Lock S-foils in attack position and begin our runs. If the bugs don't want to launch fighters, start picking them off the carriers. Save the warheads for the engines of the bigger ships."
The half-dozen fighter squadrons that Jaina Solo had brought with her zigged and zagged around the bombardment of turbolaser and missile fire. The lack of enemy fighters made avoiding the giant shipborne weaponry all the easier. That and the fact that the Force-sensitive Joiner onboard appeared more interested in playing havoc with the Star Destroyers, frigates, and other heavy vessels and not on the miniscule-in-comparison fightercraft.
"This is Survivor Lead, I'm making a run across the surface of that big one," Syal reported, sending her Chase-X into a spin as she neared one of the more intact Killik cruisers. Covering the hull like a second skin were dozens of dartfighters. Her quad lasers hammered away at them with impunity as she streaked across the surface of the ship. The cruiser's defenses tried to target her, but she dropped below their ability to pivot, skimming atop the vessel at dangerous speeds. She blasted several turrets in her path, her fighter blowing through the debris.
"*Lead, you've got a squad of darts on you,*" Tiom Rordan reported.

"Guess they didn't like me blasting apart the others. Hold them off for a few more seconds, I almost have a warhead lock on the engines."
"*Roger, Survivor Three and Four pull in and clear the tics off our backs*."
Yellow and purple energy fire flashed by her cockpit, but she tuned them out. If she tried to rise now, she'd be in range of the turbolaser cannons struggling to target her. She continued her course, blowing away anything on the cruiser's surface from more dartfighters to an important looking communication's array.
Two other Chase-X's veered in at sharp angles, though one was shredded by the turbolaser defenses Syal was trying to avoid. The other opened fire on the pursuing dartfighters, scrapping them.
Syal heard the solid tone of her missile lock and fired off her torpedoes, then veered sharply to the side to avoid the turbolasers as she climbed hard and fast. Her fighter's sensors told her that the torpedoes had detonated, knocking out one of the cruiser's five engine clusters.
Tiom's own torpedoes nailed another of the clusters, slowing the large ship considerably.
Off in the distance, Syal could see one of the GA frigates disintegrate under withering fire from two of the other Killik cruisers. The bugs were still reigning in their fighter-craft though, much to everyone's relief.
"Coming around again," Syal announced. She saw a Chiss corvette swoop in. "Care to join me, *Renegade*?"
"*If you have the room*."
"Going for engine cluster three and four."
"*The ones protected by that secondary shield-generator and quad-turrets*?"
"That's the one. If we can take them out, the ship won't have enough propulsion clear the interdictor field."
"*Sounds like a plan*."
"Tiom, you still with me?"
"*I've been flying Chase-X's longer than you, lead. It'll take more than that flying to shake me*."
"Good to hear."
Syal and Tiom's X-wings looped back around, avoiding the turbolasers and using the five-person corvette as a shield. Another shield-trio from their squadron took a different approach, shooting at the turbolasers shooting at their squad leaders.
"*I can't believe those ships aren't slowing down in the slightest*," Tiom grumbled, the Chase-X straining to keep pace with the fast-for-its-size cruiser. Like a gnat, the corvette continued to fire at the localized

shield-generators, overloading them enough to make the aft vulnerable.
"We keep shooting out the engines and it will," Syal bantered, releasing the last of her torpedoes in tandem with Tiom and watching the very satisfying explosion and lights of the glowing drives flicker out. "Two more engines to go."
"*Looks like the bugs are finally launching fighters en masse*."
"Too late for them," as Syal pulled up, she picked off several dartfighters rising from the hull of the cruiser.
Just when things started going well, a sense of dread and panic rose up in Syal, making her unconsciously juke her fighter almost into the line of fire of a turbolaser.
"Trying to pilot when every move feels like the wrong one is a pain!" Syal gritted out, trying to fight the dizzying swooping in her stomach as she angled her fighter away from another barrage of lasers. Another fighter trying to follow her and Tiom wasn't able to compensate in time and vanished in a blaze of metal and flame. "Blast it! Stupid Jedi, dark Jedi, whatever, need to leave the flying to the pilots and butt out!"
Even with the continuing sense of dread and hopelessness, Syal managed to swing her fighter back around to target the cruiser's last engine cluster. Her fingers, however, wouldn't squeeze the trigger.
"Little Seven fire my lasers. The Bug-Jedi is messing with my head, and our Jedi aren't doing a thing to make it better."
It's against my programming to cause direct harm to another living being. I'm an astromech not a YVH-series battle-droid.
"Okay, then don't fire and let the two of us become scrap. It's against your programming to self-terminate too, right?"
Firing lasers.
"Thank you," Syal grumbled. "And remind me to change your programming later."
The quad-lasers of Syal's Chase-X hammered the last of the engine clusters, but the shields of the cruiser held up. Even with Tiom's added lasers, they just didn't have the power to punch through.
"Blast it, where's that corve…" Syal saw the Chiss light-attack vessel that had helped them earlier erupt from a direct hit to the bridge. "Just great. Several more passes it is. Survivor squad, form up on me, this lug is our responsibility so let's make sure it doesn't escape."
Incoming enemy fighters.
"Well, shoot them then," Syal gritted out. "I'm doing my best right now to keep from turning tail."

Fighters on both sides were vaporized in the exchange. The decimated ranks of both the dartfighters and the GA squadron definitely a bit emptier than before.
"Let's finish this off," Syal barked. "We're going in full throttle, anyone with warheads left to the front. Once that engine block is down return to our carrier, let the big-ships worry about finishing the bug-vessel off."
"*What about those fighters*?" Survivor Seven called out worriedly.
"You have any torps left, Seven?"
"*Sure but*..."
"Then I'll worry about the fighters, you worry about the turbolasers on the ship," Syal said, doing her best to not sound biting. With her every word she felt doubt crawl down her spine, seize up her throat, and shake her hands. She took it as a silent way of determining that she was about to do something the Bug-Jedi didn't want her to do. Which didn't make doing it any easier.
Tightening her grip on the yoke, Syal took in a breath. "Here goes nothing."
-)[-VI-](-
Jaina pursed her lips, brown eyes following what should have been a short battle. Considering she had to consider tactics as well as support the thousands of men and women now fighting, her concentration was being pushed to the limit. Of the eight Killik cruisers that had entered the battle, three were now flaming wrecks. Another two were being chipped away at. But the last three, including the one with Antalia—and by extension, Jagged—were still going strong. It also meant that the Force-sensitive Joiner on board was still demoralizing the GA group, causing casualties that could have otherwise be avoided.
"Come on, Imperial Jedi Draco." Jaina willed Antalia to take out said Joiner before the trio of ships left the range of the interdictors.
"Ma'am! Several enemy frigates are lining up attack runs on us."
"Hold position," Irolia ordered back. "We move out of position and they have a free path to hyperspace. We'll just have to weather the storm."
Jaina didn't say anything, her focus split across several squadrons and frigates tangling with the Killik forces. The ship began to rock from repeated bombardments, five Killik frigates howling in on the Star Destroyer and blasting it from several angles. The Star Destroyer fired back, matching shot for shot even as deck plating began to buckle from the barrage.
"Jaina," Irolia said in a low voice.
"We're about to finish off this group's fighter support, stand by," Jaina muttered. She mentally directed the captains of the other Star

Destroyers forward, sandwiching the dartfighters against the GA's own frigate forces.
Another explosion shook Irolia's flag. "You *are* paying for the damages, right?"
Jaina nodded. Off to the side of the ship, two Killik frigates blew apart from the Star Destroyer's counter-fire. Two others came swooping in with Force-assisted coordination in an attempt to overload the Star Destroyer's already taxed shields. The Star Destroyer continued to blast away at its assailants, getting support in the form of its snubfighter compliment.
Despite both sides suffering heavy losses, the Killiks had run out of fighters first and were beginning to feel the effects the lack of fighter-cover had created. The surviving GA fighters were mercilessly picking holes in the larger vessels, blowing away turbolaser batteries and blasting apart vital systems.
Not even caring about the Killik frigates that were rapidly crumbling under the pan-directional barrage, Jaina focused back on the Killik flagship. Her attention had been caught in the spike of activity from both Antalia and the Force-sensitive Joiner onboard the ship. The flagship was on the verge of leaving the interdiction field, however, which wasn't good.
"The Killiks appeared to have lost their coordination," Irolia voiced in surprise. "It doesn't look like any of the vessels know where they're going next."
"Flight Officer Draco is fighting the Joiner controlling the fleet," Jaina said tersely, reaching across the void of space to lend her apprentice as much strength as she could. "We can't let that command ship jump. I want all fighters shooting that thing's engines apart."
Irolia gave the order, but then looked to Jaina. "Without our fighter cover, the Killiks will be able to concentrate their fire on us."
"If we give the Joiner time to regroup, that won't matter. Even if he's a bug-Jedi, he still needs to focus to achieve the Battle Meld. We hammer him from all sides and he won't be able to adapt."
The Star Destroyer began to shake again as one of the remaining Killik cruisers and an escort of two frigates took the opportunity to brush by the other GA forces and focus on Jaina's ship. Apparently the Joiner Jedi had the same idea and was trying to take Jaina out. The only difference was that he no longer had numerical superiority and was actively trying to stay alive as the Imperial Jedi Antalia Draco engaged him on his ship.
The next few tense minutes were filled with the remaining ordnance held by both sides being flung at the other with reckless abandonment.

Guided by Jaina's direction, the GA forces encircled the remaining Killik vessels. The GA fighters hounded the Killik flagship, out of warheads but still blasting holes in its failing shields.
"This battle is over," Jaina muttered, her senses still stretched to the battle outside the cold metal hull of the Chiss Star Destroyer.
As she spoke, the last Killik cruiser that wasn't the fleet's flagship broke apart under the concentrated attack of GA fighter and capital ship firepower. The flagship itself was left dead in space, atmosphere, and swarms of bugs being vented into space through the myriad of holes it now had.
Gradually, the laserfire ended and ships began to coast to a halt. What had only been a frantic fight for life and death a few moments before was now an absolute calm; the void of space becoming the tomb for all those not lucky enough to have survived.
-)[-VII-](-
The only thing Anakin heard was his own ragged breathing and the constant hum and clash of lightsabers as he back-pedaled across the gravel-strewn metal corridor of Welk's asteroid base. His feet and arms continued to move fast, keeping up with the flurry of six golden blades constantly stabbing and slashing in his direction. The walls, ceiling, and floor were covered with fresh scorch marks and deep furrows, the corridor illuminated only by the lightsaber blades and the flashes of their repeated meetings. Anakin knew he had survived thus far because the narrow bug-made hallway was restricting their movements. But Welk didn't seem to mind at all. In fact, the deranged form dark Jedi-turned-Joiner had remained silent the entire fight, his compound eyes almost emotionless as it reflected the bright lights of their blades.
The corridor turned into a narrow walkway over a gaping chasm. Only a set of mag-con fields, its orange-red glow providing additional lighting, kept the vacuum of space out. A near slip and Anakin briefly saw several rocky pebbles fall off the walkway and through the field as if it didn't exist at all.
"'Kay, no falling," Anakin muttered, his eyes tracking three yellow blades at once. Though the increased room to maneuver was welcome, it also meant that Welk could bring all his lightsabers to bear at once. Anakin tried to endure the onslaught of all six blades, grimacing as he did. He needed a new plan, and the idea that popped into his head was the type that would have Tahiri yelling at him for days' end. Dropping his Vong-shroud, Anakin re-immersed himself in the Force and staggered as the full weight of Welk's aura of terror washed over him. Doing his best to tune it out, he threw his lightsaber through the air,

leaping backwards at the same time. The blade cleaved through the air far above Welk's head, and the Joiner ignored it. Instead, the massive once-Dathomiri Joiner charged at Anakin's weaponless form, intent on ending the fight. Anakin stood unflinchingly at the end of the bridge, even as his heart pounded in his ears from the emotions Welk was projecting.

Despite Welk charging in the hellish glow of the mag-con field, golden blades swiping through the air, Anakin guided a volley of rocky stalactite slabs cleaved from the walls of the asteroid like homing missiles. As big and as insect-plated as Welk had become, even the Joiner King didn't appreciate the oversized projectiles that slammed into him. One smashed apart an insectoid arm, causing Welk to lose a lightsaber. Anakin's lightsaber followed, slicing off the pair of arms that Welk had lifted to fend off the rest of the barrage. The other projectiles hit the giant Joiner as he was spinning around, causing him to snarl in rage. The Force pulsated around him in a violent backlash that sent Anakin flying backwards and knocked aside the remaining stony missiles.

Another angry roar alerted Anakin with barely a second to spare, and the Jedi rolled to the side just as a leaping Welk landed with all three blades poised to skewer the Jedi. Anakin kicked out with his foot, the impact doing nothing to Welk. With a gesture, Welk sent Anakin flying backwards, skidding across the rock and metal ground and impacting painfully against another wall.

Another roar, and Anakin rolled again, the flash of three golden blades carving up the wall he had hit seen out of the corner of his eyes. With Welk's aura of fear, Anakin could barely formulate a plan that wasn't otherwise suicidal.

Anakin pushed off with the Force, trying to buy himself more room. The Joiner flipped through the air, and landed on another stalactite, clinging to it like a bug. From its perch, it hurled all three of its lightsabers at Anakin. The Jedi arched and twisted to avoid the first attack, but the spinning blades rapidly doubled-back and Anakin wasn't quite fast enough to dodge the same three bullet-like projectiles once more. One blade scorched his cheek as it narrowly missed slicing his head in two. A second blade cut a furrow in his left leg. It was the third blade that delivered the most serious injury though. Anakin staggered, unbalanced as the golden blade glowed out from his side. The side where he had taken an amphistaff all those years ago on the day he had last seen Welk.

The familiar burning pain was not a welcome one.

Welk made a gesture, and the lightsaber burst out through Anakin, leaving a neat cauterized hole in Anakin's side. The Jedi gasped and fell to one knee, hand over the wound.
Welk approached his downed foe, a sense of satisfaction spreading through the Kind. It seemed fitting that the CowardSolo should die of a wound that should have taken him back on Myrkr. How a change in the timelines, the undoing of one of the locks barring the silver-eyed sleeper from the galaxy, was now being corrected. Welk amplified his aura of fear, wanting to see despair and defeat in Anakin's eyes. With one of his remaining arms, Welk grabbed Anakin by the neck and lifted him off the ground.
"And now you die, Anakin."
To Welk's surprise, Anakin smiled faintly. "I made a promise, Welk. You know about me and promises."
"What?"
"You doubted that you could beat me, even with the power of the Kind, didn't you?" Anakin said softly. "Just as I doubted whether I could succeed or not. The thing about doubts, if you don't want to face them, they get the better of you at the end."
Another snap hiss of a lightsaber was heard, just before a red blade burst straight from Welk's chest. Startled, Welk dropped Anakin and looked at the blade in stunned astonishment.
"What…" Welk blinked in disbelief, taking a step back. "We looked into the meld of Myrkr, into your minds, you had no such plan."
"I've grown since Myrkr, Welk," Anakin said softly, managing to stand despite his wound. "Time changes people, they learn from their mistakes. Did you truly think I would bring everyone here and rely only on my own ideas?"
*"So you **don't** want to know what we have planned?" Kyp said in bemusement.*
"No. Once there, I'm going to keep Welk's attention focused on me. Through the Myrkr bond, he's going to know if I'm up to something or not. I'm going to be relying on you guys to come up with a plan to end this, preferably before Welk kills me."
"And anything is on the table?" Lomi's voice was curious.
"Anything, everything," Anakin said. "Don't limit yourself on my account."
"I'm not following," Waxarn said, frowning.
"This plan can't be one of mine. Welk is too attuned to the way I think. Each of you are very crafty and think in ways a lot different than me. Use that craftiness, your planning abilities, and come up with something to neutralize Welk. I'll buy you guys the time you need to

pull whatever it is off, but I won't be involved in any level of that plan besides that."
"Okay..." Kyp rubbed his chin in thought. "A plan that's not Anakin-like."
"I think we can do that," Rena Lai said, her expression serious. "Especially if we can use both light and dark to get it done. No restrictions."
"One other thing," Anakin said. "My brother will most likely join us if things get that bad. One of you is going to have to clue him in without letting him in on the whole plan. His mental defenses are a whole lot better than mine, so if I keep Welk distracted, Jacen should really be able to help you guys out."
"I'll let him know," Kyp agreed. "And for the record, this non-plan of yours.. it's crazy."
"Don't you mean suicidal?" Damaya raised an eyebrow.
"She said it, not me," Waxarn pointed to the Singing Mountain Clan warrior.
"This will work out," Anakin smiled. "I have faith in you guys. The me from the past would go into this with a plan I made, trusting the Force to make it work. What Welk doesn't expect is for me to give up that responsibility to others. I learned my lesson on Myrkr, and I'm not going to repeat that mistake again."
"You are Anakin Solo…"
"Like the Kind, I am just one mind," Anakin said evenly, his blue eyes pained but full of pity. "There are many others who can think of things I would never be able to. I came here with a team, Welk. Team. I didn't understand it back on Myrkr, but this isn't Myrkr anymore. While I fought you, absorbed as much of your aura as I could, the others were far from idle. Did you even realize that your connection to the Kind has been muted?"
"You…"
"I am only one person, Welk. That's why I trusted my life to Jacen, Waxarn, Kyp, even your old master."
As if a curtain had been drawn back, Lomi Plo and all her mechanical parts materialized directly behind Welk, cybernetic eyes glowing without sympathy. Standing behind her on the other side of the walkway, amid a mass of Killik corpses were Damaya, Rena, and Quin.
"What…" Welk blinked in bewilderment at the trio. "But they are dead. We felt it."
Rena laughed "You were of Dathomir, you know Nightsisters. When have we ever been the self-sacrificing type? Rending Thoughts doesn't kill the user, it strengthens the user with the deaths of all those killed.

It just takes a mountain of energy, which I replaced after slaughtering all your minions!"
"You were one mind after all," Damaya said evenly.
Lomi placed a hand on Welk's cheek, almost affectionately. "Hello Welk, and good bye."
Welk stared at her in disbelief, still not able to process the turn of events, before Lomi removed her blade from his chest and removed his head. Lomi made a sweeping motion with her hand, and Welk's body was sent off the edge of the cliff, where it plummeted through the mag-con field and out into space.
With a weak smile, Anakin held up his comlink. "Jacen, the bugs?"
"*I've taken control of the hive, ordered a retreat*," Jacen reported back. "*Any hives loyal to the Kind should now be packing up for the Unknown Regions again*."
"You can do that?" Anakin blinked.
"*Fill the void before someone else does, Vergere 101*," Jacen answered back. "*And you, Little Brother? I'm assuming the blow-torch feeling that the rest of us felt was a little worse for you.*"
"Nothing I haven't survived before," Anakin winced, reminded of his pain. His one relief was that the lightsaber blade left quite a different wound than an amphistaff. At least he wasn't in danger of bleeding out.
"*That's not really reassuring, Little Brother. Most of your wounds are of the life-threatening kind*."
Anakin's legs chose that moment to give out. This time, though, Lomi caught him before he hit the ground. At that moment, the two Force-users looked at each other in disbelief.
Holding up his comlink again, Anakin glanced at Lomi. "Hey, Master Durron, have Gamoreans started jetpacking yet?"
"*Huh*?"
"Very funny, Solo," Lomi muttered, letting him go and stomping off like only a dark Jedi Master could.
Anakin plopped back to the ground with a groan. "Forget the question, just delirium talking."
"*I'll have the bacta tank ready*," Waxarn sighed coming in behind Damaya, Quin, and Rena.
"*So we won, right?*" Nelani's voice joined the conversation.
"*No*," Jacen 's voice matched Anakin's exhausted tone. "*We survived. I don't think anyone won this one.*"
-)[-Chapter End-](-

Anakin

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Anakin Solo would not deny that he was spent, physically, emotionally, spiritually. Barely a third of the ships he had brought with him were able to make the return trip, its crews decimated. Less than a quarter of the Jedi Denon had sent—a quarter of the very young Knights and apprentices that had been pressed into duty because politics wouldn't allow fully trained Masters and Knights to be so far removed from the events closer to the Core—were left. Many too shell-shocked from feeling so many of their friends and family die in the battlefield that they'd need counseling for years to come. Sure the Killiks' seemingly unstoppable horde of billions of bugs might have been stopped, but the defenders hadn't won either.

So many of the governments who had sent their ships at his request were receiving none back at the end of the campaign. The Corellian fleet was reduced to a single cruiser and a few support vessels, its fighter compliment nearly completely wiped out. Especially hard hit was the Tion Hegemony, whose ships had been a part of the rear-guard commanded by Jagged and Wedge. The royal hegemony had lost every single vessel and every single soul who had journeyed out into the Unknown Region in support of the defensive measure. Likewise, the Yuuzhan Vong force led by Loiric Kaan had only a few frigates and a handful of coralskippers left. Loiric himself had perished when a suicidal Killik vessel met his own in a resounding explosion. Adumar, which had contributed a vast amount of the warheads used in the campaign, had lost all but two of its missile tenders and gunships Even the rebellious Bothan movement led by Asyr Sei'lar, hadn't escaped the decimation of their military units. Neither had Hapes, Sollust or the remnants of the Hutt Empire.

In fact, the only governments that seemed to be looking forward to the future were the ones that either didn't contribute any vessels at all, or contributed a token one or two and kept their own fleets in reserve.

"*Director*. *We've just entered the Inner Rim, sir. You asked to be notified. Helm-control estimates another week until we reach Denon.*"

Director of the Galactic Alliance Guard, Anakin Solo gestured to the comm unit, his gaze not leaving the blue tunnel of hyperspace outside the viewport. "Thank you, lieutenant. Have we had any more trouble with the other ships?"

"*The Renewal had to drop out of hyperspace a parsec ago due to unstable spikes in its reactor. Admiral Bres-Durron had the Furian stay back with it just in case.*"

Anakin sighed, rubbing his face and feeling the weeks' old beard he had begun to grow. His exhausted blue eyes stared back at him in the

reflection of the transparasteel window, letting him know that he did indeed look as tired as he felt. The *Renewal* was a medical frigate, a packed-to-the-brim-with-patients medical frigate that had suffered a Killik missile barrage shortly before Welk had been neutralized. Thought its shields mostly held, it had sustained damage throughout the vessel. In ordinary cases, the patients onboard would be transferred to another ship. Only, there was no other medical ship that could handle the thousands of patients it was caring for.
"Thanks again. Inform me when we hit the Core, and let me know if any other ships have to drop out of formation. Solo, out."
No sooner had he turned the comm off, then it began to chime again.
"Was there more?"
"*Sir, receiving priority transmission from Denon. It's the Chief of State, sir.*"
"Put him through."
The image of Kenth Hamner appeared over Anakin's desk. "*Director Solo*."
"Master Hamner….congratulations on winning the election," Anakin said evenly. He was mindful to keep his emotions in check, feeling nothing positive towards the man who had sent them zero support after the initial surge under Omas.
"*And congratulations on your victory. I have already begun spreading the news that the Killik threat is no more. That, with the Jedi more involved in the government and you as head of the G.A.G, we can now usher in the Peace of a Millennium."*
"You do that, sir," Anakin continued.
Hamner frowned slightly*. "As head of the G.A.G I was hoping you'd be able to be on hand to welcome this new era with me. We need to show the galaxy that the government and the Jedi Order are united with one purpose."*
"I'm sure you'll manage without me, Chief of State. The galaxy needs more than symbols to get things done. While you are soaking in the spotlight and glow of the holocams, I'll be going about the galaxy attending the several dozen mass memorial services for the people who died following me out into the Unknown Regions."
"*Anakin, the galaxy is tired of death, tired of the negative news and depressing stories. Would you rather they focus on the past, or look towards a brighter tomorrow? If you make your presence seen at these memorials, all the galaxy will focus on is the deaths of the few soldiers that…*"
"Master Hamner, when you get several million soldiers killed, I'll let you prioritize the importance of their sacrifice," Anakin said sharply, his

fatigue getting the better of him. "By the way, thank you very much for the reinforcements you sent, they made all the difference."
"*Reinforce…?*" Kenth paused in understanding, then shook his head. "*Again, Anakin we cannot dwell in the past. What is done is done, and now thanks to the sacrifice of the brave men and women who died in the Unknown Regions, the rest of the galaxy has a chance to recover from the non-stop warring*. *Please do not make me make it an order, but I fully expect you to return to Denon and attend the victory ceremonies. As head of the Galactic Alliance Guard, you have more responsibilities now than just your own misplaced sense of guilt. You said that the galaxy needs more than symbols, and you are correct. It is through your actions that things will get done, and dwelling on the deaths will do little more than set the tone. They fought and died for the galaxy, they will be remembered. But the living still need to be attended to, it will be good of you to remember that too.*"
Anakin exhaled slowly, the urge to reach out into the hologram and slap Hamner ebbing. "Chief of State, if it is your order to attend the victory ceremonies I will. But I will make it a point to mention everyone else who cannot attend because they died making such a ceremony possible."
Kenth's face hardened slightly. "*That is your choice, Solo. And yes, that is my order."*
"I'll be at Denon in two weeks then. I'm trying to…"
"*I understand your father loaned you his ship. At your current location, you can be at Denon by tomorrow evening."*
"Most of the ships with me are barely holding together. I'm trying to make sure no more lives are lost en route to what I am sure is a fabulous celebration of the victory they achieved," Anakin said coolly, his blue eyes piercing into Kenth's hologram. "I'll be at Denon in two weeks at the earliest, Chief of State Hamner. I'm afraid I can't get there any sooner. Solo, out."
Anakin shut off the holo-call, consequences be damned, and paced stormily back to the viewport. Forget the fleet's losses, the aching absence of so many Jedi weighed equally on him. Painfully so was the death of another one of his brother and sister's close friends. As his thoughts turned to the friend lost, he could feel similar grief from all the other Jedi still with the fleet. All the Jedi had lost someone they cared for in the five-month long war. Rajade and Ijun were the only two survivors of their Dathomiri squad, Sanola in a medically induced coma and very near death aboard the *Renewal*. The Death Knights were once again starting from scratch, with all but four of Waxarn's apprentices dying in the fight against overwhelming odds. Yavin,

Ossus, and Denon would each have a graduating apprentice class many many times smaller than what they had started out with at the beginning of the year. The only good that came out of it all was that the Jedi of the Swarm War now shared a bond very similar to that of the Myrkr survivors, forged in battle and death and nigh unbreakable.
Anakin let out a bitter laugh. And that was the positive—traumatizing a bunch of teens and Jedi younger than he was so badly that they had to create an unbreakable Force-bond with each other to stay sane.
Hamner could play his political games for all he wanted, but Anakin was not in the mood for such posturing and symbolism. He had sent countless data-packets via courier to Denon, updating the government on the dire nature of the war. He had received nothing in return. Even though he had taken his allied fleet into the Unknown Region fully expecting the odds to not be in his favor, the lack of the rest of the galaxy's concern with what was going on was biting to say the least. It was a miracle in it of itself that anyone had survived the war at all.
But as the hyperspace tunnel coursed by, Anakin did his best to dispel his negativity back into the Force.
This was the job he had chosen, what he had signed up to do. Protect the galaxy to the best of his abilities not for his own happiness, or the happiness of those who served under him, but for the trillions of lives out there who truly didn't know what it took to keep the galaxy safe from the darkness that wanted to swallow it whole.

0-o-II-o-0

Seeing the *Veila* dock in the hangar bay, Anakin couldn't help but feel his spirits rise slightly. It had been a pleasant surprise when Tahiri had brought her ship out of hyperspace during his fleet's latest cool-down stop. The fact that she was the only one onboard indicated that she was well aware of the emotional turmoil that permeated the ship and had spared their children from feeling the distress.
It was only upon seeing the ship did he realize just how much he had missed his wife. He easily recalled the many times he had turned to his side expecting her presence or glib remark during the war only to remember that he had sent her back to the Core. He grimaced at that, not wanting to search their bond to see if she was still hurting over that decision. Then, as he reflected on that thought, let out a groan as he discovered that he had been blocking her out on a subconscious level.
He didn't need the Force to tell him that she was not going to be happy about that.
The ramp lowered, and Anakin felt his throat grow tight as the petite, blond form of his wife came into view. Barefoot, clad in a simple

orange pilot's jumpsuit so very reminiscent of their Jedi Academy days he exhaled roughly, his hands clenching the material of his pants pockets. He saw her crystal-green gaze flicker over him, her expression unreadable as she ducked out from her ship.
"Tahiri," Anakin said softly.
"Hey, Hero Boy," Tahiri answered back, stepping up to him and sliding her hands over his so that his pockets pinned their hands to his side. Saying nothing, Tahiri just pressed her face into his chest, seemingly releasing a breath of relief in unison with her husband. She then tilted her head back. "Cassa and Jayce are excited that I'm bringing their daddy back to them."
"They're with mom and dad?" Anakin asked.
Tahiri nodded. "I finally convinced Mara to show me the intel-reports, saw how bad it got out there. The kids don't need to feel that yet."
"Yeah."
Tahiri stood on the tips of her toes and gave Anakin a soft, slow kiss. When they parted, she hugged him again. "That was for making it back."
He returned the embrace, marshalling his emotions. "Thanks for looking after our kids."
They reinforced each other through their bond, the Force reconnecting them and allowing them to understand each other without the need for speech. They stayed in their embrace for several long minutes, ignoring the activity of the hangar bay detail and the coldness of the hangar. After nearly half a year apart—the longest they'd ever gone since the Yuuzhan Vong War—they were together again.
"What are your plans now?" Tahiri asked, taking his hand in a tight grip as they separated.
"Told the Chief of State I'd swing by Denon in two or so weeks," Anakin said, they left the hangar and headed deeper into the ship. "I…I have something to do before that though."
Sensing the walled-off emotions, Tahiri just leaned into him. "Something?"
Anakin spoke in halting tones as he kept his eyes forward. "Lowie…His fighter was shot down along with the light cruiser he was escorting. They hit Ilum pretty hard, but most of them survived the impact. Even badly wounded, he protected the survivors of the crash until the Killiks overwhelmed him. After the fighting, we found his body in the middle of a mountain of Killik corpses. The survivors of the cruiser were still alive."
"A hero to the end," Tahiri said softly. "You okay?"

"Doesn't matter if I am or not," Anakin shrugged, batting his emotions back beneath the surface. "It won't bring him or any of those others who died back. Anyways, after delivering Lowie to his family, Tenel Ka and Jacen have to return to Hapes. Tekli will be supervising the care for the thousands of injured we're bring back. Tesar has to rebuild the Yavin Praxeum's graduating class since most of them didn't make it. And we all go our separate ways."
"Jaina?" Tahiri asked.
"Stayed with Jagged to help sort out the mess we left in that corner of the galaxy. And we get to find out just how good Kenth Hamner will be at keeping the rest of the galaxy together."
"He's pretty pro-Jedi intervention," Tahiri mentioned. "You coming back victorious will have proven his point."
"Me coming back after getting a third of the Order killed off isn't going to give him the Jedi Order he needs to help fix the galaxy," Anakin groaned, shaking his head. "I foresee fun times in office, and even funner meetings with him as we try to pull the galaxy back together. How about you? I heard about the Bothan-Yuuzhan Vong War on the way back, how there was a Slayer involved."
"Slayers," Tahiri corrected. "And from the sound of it, more of them are out there. With Zonama missing, and the Yuuzhan Vong in the galaxy in the worst place ever since the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War, they're more than a little vulnerable. Kenth Hamner tapped me to be the Yuuzhan Vong-GA liaison to make sure we won't have another war any time soon. While you play politics in Denon, I'll be visiting the larger colonies and trying to form a localized Yuuzhan Vong government in the absence of orders from Zonama."
"Cassa and Jayce will definitely enjoy seeing the galaxy at least," Anakin said, trying to find the bright side of things.
"Yeah. But you know the Yuuzhan Vong who stayed in the galaxy are hardly the ones we want our children growing up around. Some of them still believe that the systems they conquered and are now staying in were given to them by the Yun'o."
"We'll get through this somehow," Anakin draped an arm around her and gave her an affectionate squeeze. "We've survived a couple of wars, political turmoil, and two kids."
Tahiri giggled at the last item on the list. "Somehow."
"Somehow." Anakin agreed. "It's great having you here, Tahiri. Thanks for coming out to meet me."
"Dummy, did you really think I'd just twiddle my thumbs and wait for you on Denon? I *know* how that brain of yours works, remember? Now let me tell you about our kids. Did you know that Jayce is quite the

wanderer now that he can walk? Cassa of course has to follow him around, thinks it's a fun game even when Jayce decides to toddle into a ventilation shaft…"
Anakin smiled as their bond and her light chatter continued to alleviate the negatude that had built up in her absence. Seeing her in the orange jumpsuit, he was once again reminded of Ikrit's words. They were definitely stronger together.
0-o-III-o-0
Anakin stared at the blue-green world of Kashyyyk from the cockpit of the *Millennium Falcon*. In the co-pilot seat was Jacen, with Tenel Ka and Tahiri seated behind them. Tekli was in the cargo-hold with the body. Tesar was in the doorway, his expression unusually somber for a Barabel as he was affected by the emotions coursing through their meld. Jaina unfortunately had to remain in Imperial space to help Jagged keep order. But even across the stars, the young adults could feel her presence within the meld.
"It's not your fault, Anakin," Jacen voiced what everyone was thinking, the vocoder attached to his neck aiding his damaged vocal chords.
"I keep telling myself that," Anakin said with a half-smile. "I guess I'm hoping one of these times it will kick in."
The descent through the upper atmosphere was smooth, the *Falcon* gliding through the silvery-white clouds turned red and orange by the setting sun. The towering trees of the wooded planet came into view like mountains growing out of the ground, their shades of green, brown, and blue darkening as twilight slowly fell over. Coasting just above the treetops, the *Falcon* disturbed various flocks of flying creatures that took off all around the ship in squawking protest.
But eventually the light freighter made its way to its destination, a lone landing pad in the center of a thick thicket of magnificent trees.
The landing ramp lowered, and the Jedi emerged in somber procession, bearing with them a hover-platform that held their friend's remains. Anakin approached the trio of Wookies waiting for them and bowed as low as he could. "Kallabow, Mahraccor, I'm sorry, but I wasn't able to bring your son back. Sirrakuk, your brother was a great friend, and he saved many lives during the war."
Lowbacca's parents silently approached the floating platform, the cryo-chamber it held preserving Lowie's body. Both parents placed a furry hand on the transparasteel top, gazing at their son before emitting rowling cries of sorrow that echoed across the forest. Sirrakuk gently patted Anakin on the back, her own brown fur shifting in silent grief.
"[My brother is… was a fine Jedi, and he would want you to continue saving lives, making the galaxy a better place. So do not stop, Anakin

Solo, promise me and my parents, that no matter what, you will continue Lowbacca's fight in his name,]" Sirrakuk said determinedly. "[Promise that his death meant something, that he died for a cause you will be proud to continue.]"
Anakin, his face tight with grief, nodded. "I promise."
"[Then do not apologize any more,]" Sirrakuk rowled hoarsely, resting her own hands on the floating platform that contained her brother. "[Lowbacca would not want you to beat yourself up. Your Force decreed it was his time.]"
"Would he have been out in the Outer Rim if it wasn't for me though?" Anakin whispered, barely audible.
Sirrakuk cast a sidelong glance at Anakin. "[Knowing my brother, he would. He would have been on the frontlines even if you weren't present. He could have been Joined, he could have come back alive, could have been crippled, so many possibilities, but it doesn't matter now. He has rejoined the Force, and his body will soon rejoin the soil of Kashyyyk with the rest of our ancestors, where the planet will embrace him as the hero he was.]"
Anakin swallowed the lump in his throat, unable to keep the few stray tears from escaping his eyes as he bowed his head in silent thanks. Tahiri stepped up, gently wrapping her arms around one of his, and he stepped back into her, trying to use their bond to find some semblance of balance.
Lowbacca's family similarly embraced each other, their grief and sadness pouring through the Force and causing Lowbacca's friends to all bow their heads.
"[We will ready his body for the funerary ceremonies,]" Mahraccor barked softly looking to the gathered Jedi. "[You may accompany us if you wish. He spoke highly of all his friends, and your presence helps to lessen the pain of his passing.]"
"He is family," Jacen answered.
"We would be honored to accompany you," Tenel Ka added.
"Master Skywalker, and my parents should be arriving on Kashyyyk tomorrow evening," Anakin explained softly.
"[Yes, they've sent word,]" Kallabow finally spoke, radiating pain at the loss of her only son. "[We are grateful that Lowbacca is surrounded by such good friends, family, even away from the trees of his homeworld.]"
Thought forest of Kashyyyk was alive with the sounds of the many birds and creatures that inhabited it, the walk along the torch-lined wooden pathways was silent. Night grew quickly, with the tall boughs

of the trees blocking out the last of the sunlight well before the sun had fully set.
As the group passed a major thoroughfare, Anakin saw something that made him stop. He waved the others on. "Keep going guys, I'll catch up."
The others continued, but Tahiri stayed where she was, holding his hand. She had seen what had caught his gaze, sensed the shift in emotions that he had managed to hide from everyone else. Silently, she walked with him towards the object that had diverted his path.
A life-sized wooden statue stood tall and proud off to the side of a nearby pathway. Illuminated by the torches surrounding the walkway, the figure almost appeared lifelike in the flickering light.
"Chewie," Anakin breathed out, unable to stop the sinking feeling in his stomach as he gazed upon the beautifully detailed statue. All at once, the dam holding back the torrent of emotions broke and he sunk to his knees. This time, he made no effort to stop the tears from flowing as he sagged to his knees in front of the statue. Taking in a shuddering breath, he squeezed his eyes close. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."
Tahiri knelt next to him and hugged Anakin to her, using the Force to prevent the rest of the group from sensing his breakdown. She said nothing, letting Anakin know through their bond that she was there for him, would always be at his side. Anakin in turn just cried silently as the pent up emotions and the innumerous deaths of the war finally caught up to him. Rubbing his back, Tahiri closed her own eyes, his pain, raw and unfiltered, tugging at her heartstrings.
"You've done your best," Tahiri finally whispered, continuing to offer him comfort.
Anakin nodded tiredly. "That's the scary part. I pour everything I have into these missions, and this is the best outcome?"
"I would like to see anyone else do it better," Tahiri muttered, helping him to his feet. "Come on, let's go before the others start to worry about you."
"One moment." Anakin reached to his side and freed up his lambent lightsaber, while he wiped away the last of his tears with the sleeve of his other hand.
"Anakin?"
"This isn't the last time I'll give orders that get people killed. I know that. When I get back to Denon, I'm going to be put in charge of the Galactic Alliance Guard full-time," Anakin said, hefting his saber in his hands and staring at it long and hard. "I'll be wrapped up in politics, making decisions no Jedi should. Deciding the fates of people I probably won't even meet. This saber…it's from another life, from

another me. The me who would give his life if it meant Chewie could still be here today. Who'd led us to Myrkr thinking he could change the course of a war with his ideals and get everyone out alive at the same time. The me you somehow fell in love with all those years ago no matter how thickheaded he got. Whatever I become in office, this saber, the saber of a Jedi, shouldn't be spoiled by that."
"You're thinking you'll become something bad," Tahiri frowned.
"I'm thinking that I have no idea what's in store for me," Anakin replied back. "Cal Omas had one vision for the Galactic Alliance Guard, Kenth Hamner a completely different vision. Both want to use the G.A.G to safeguard the people, but have very different ways of doing it. I'm not sure what sacrifices I'll have to make, but the thought of anyone else in charge of a secret police force is enough to make me stay in the position no matter how much I'll probably hate it."
Tahiri gripped her right arm with her left as she watched Anakin carve a small circle into the base of the statue with his purple blade. Hole made, he then rested the lightsaber into it, as if it were an offering. He stepped away, staring at the statue's head for several long minutes. The evening on Kashyyyk fell all around them, the chirping of insects and the crackling of the torches drowning out any other sounds. Eventually, he forced a lopsided smile as he turned to look at Tahiri.
"Now Chewie can look after that me all over again. Just like he did on Sernpidal."
Tahiri hugged her husband once more, feeling his arms wrap around her and hold her tightly as he rested his head atop hers. "I love you, Anakin Solo. No matter what your government position turns you into, I'll always be at your side to keep you on the straight and narrow."
"I'll be counting on that you know," Anakin breathed in her scent. Her presence succeeded in calming him, and he gave her a grateful squeeze in turn. "I needed that."
"Definitely," Tahiri said nuzzling him. "You ready to face the others?"
"I'll get more questions if I delay," Anakin answered back.
Together the two walked away from Chewbacca's statue, not even glancing back once at the saber the mighty Wookie's image now guarded.

0-o-IV-o-0

With Cassa seated next to him, Jayce between the two of them, and Tahiri on the other side of Cassa, Anakin felt the love they were projecting to him. Even though he was now waiting for the funeral service for one of his family's closest friends, just having his family nearby eased the ache in his chest. Helped to fill some of the void left by Lowbacca's death. As he sat on the wooden bench, a hand clasped

with one of Tahiri's behind the backs of their children, he closed his eyes and sent them silent thanks and bursts of his own love for them. Leia and Han had arrived with Luke and Mara in the *Jade Shadow*, with Janek, Ben, Cassa, and Jayce in tow. Just thinking back to that moment, Anakin remembered how tense he had been when he realized that his father had indeed come to the funeral.

I

Several Hours earlier

I

Anakin wasn't sure what to feel as he saw his parents emerge from the *Jade Shadow*. Sure, he knew that they were going to be present at Lowbacca's funeral, but with everything going on, the actual implications of them being present had never sunk in. Slowly handing off a confused Cassa to her mom, Anakin straightened nervously as he met his father's gaze.

Flashbacks from the death of another Wookie family friend caused Anakin to quickly shut off the torrent of emotions lest his children feel them.

"Mom, dad," Anakin said evenly.

"Aankin," Leia said tenderly, hugging him and then stepping back. "It's good to see you alive and well."

"It's good to be alive and well," Anakin said with a forced smile.

Leia patted him on the shoulder as she moved passed him. "We're just glad you're back."

Leia then moved on to fuss over Jacen—whose war-time disfiguring injury couldn't be missed in the afternoon light of Kashyyyk—leaving Anakin with his father.

Before Anakin could even say anything, he found himself in a tight hug by his father .Stunned, he could only stand where he was, the emotional shields he had put up threatening to crumble. Han stepped back, an emotion Anakin couldn't decipher on his face, and wagged his finger at Anakin.

"I thought I told you, not a scratch," Han finally said, gesturing to the neighboring landing pad where the *Falcon* was parked. "The old girl has a half-dozen pits in it that I definitely don't recall seeing earlier, and that's just what I saw when the *Shadow* did a fly-by of her. What did you do, fly her through an asteroid field or something?"

"Asteroid field, swarm of enemy fighters, exploding secret lair of the villain," Anakin cracked a smile of his own. "I'm lucky that Lando did more damage to it on the Death Star run though, so that should count for something, right? I mean, look, the comm-dish is still up there."

"It's being held together by a couple of welds that I can see from here," Han said pointing to the half-a-dish on the top of the ship. A Killik dartfighter had sheared away the other half in a near-miss suicidal run. He walked with his son to the edge of the landing platform so they could better see the *Falcon*.
"It's fifty-percent more than what Lando brought back," Anakin defended.
"Lando also didn't get all those gouges dug into my ship," Han said forlornly.
"You're right, sorry dad."
"At least she did her job," Han chuckled wryly. "The most important part of her came back intact."
"Huh?"
"Her crew," Han said, his eyes briefly flicking to Anakin before turning back to the distant forest. "I really couldn't care less about the pits, the dings, the broken comm-dish. Those I can replace. Heck, it'll give me an excuse to completely upgrade her now that there are so many holes in it. But you, Jacen, Jaina, the *Falcon* did her job in ensuring the three of you survived."
"Dad…I couldn't bring back Lowbacca," Anakin said haltingly.
Han released a slow breath. "I know. And I'm sorry your friend died. I'm…look, I'm sorry I blew up at you about Chewie all those years ago. This is different…*I'm* different than I was back then. It's war, I get it. Losing family…well…let's just say that I owe your Force tons for letting you and your brother and sister get through two wars intact. I can't ask for much more, right?"
Anakin swallowed, nodding silently as he two tried to focus on anything but his father standing next to him.
"I know that you Jedi can feel deaths a lot more than us average people," Han said softly. "And in some ways, I wish I could protect you, and Jacen, and Jaina from that pain. But me being me…all I can do is try to make your jobs a little easier."
"Thanks, dad," Anakin said, his voice barely above a whisper.
"I know you accept that gig as director of the G.A.G. Don't let the office make who you are, let who you are shape the office. Unless you put your own spin on how you want the office to work, you'll forever be bounced back and forth between the many politicians with their own view on how things should be done. Take it from someone who knows a thing or two about running a legitimate part of a galactic government."
"Even if your boss is the Chief of State?"

"Especially then," Han said. "People are already seeing the G.A.G as an extension of the Chief of State's office. What you do will help to define Hamner's term in office. If he gives you an order you think is completely ridiculous or against your Jedi values, let him know. If he insists, try to carry it out, but in your own way. Trust me, the public will know the difference."

Anakin finally looked to his father, the afternoon Kashyyyk light highlighting the many wrinkles and silver hairs on Han's face. Han, sensing his son's gaze, looked to Anakin and smiled faintly. "Come on, Anakin. Let's get back to the rest of our family. Those kids of yours definitely were excited about seeing you again."

"Their first time on Kashyyyk, I think they're more excited about the giant trees and moving, hairy play structures," Anakin said with a rueful smile. He gestured to where Cassa was already climbing onto the arm of an amused Sirrakuk, gesturing for Jayce to do the same to Sirrakuk's other arm.

Han laughed, patting Anakin's back as the two of them walked back to rejoin the rest of their family.

I

Present

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Once again the cool twilight descended onto Kashyyyk, the scent of the night flowers, of pine and sap wafting through the wooded copse. The circular funerary platform was packed as Lowbacca's rare status as a Wookie Jedi meant that all of Kashyyyk held him in high esteem. Other Jedi who had known or fought with Lowbacca were present, as was most of the surviving crew of the cruiser he had defended. There were solemn expressions all around, with even the surrounding wildlife sensing the mood and falling eerily silent.

At the center of the platform was the funerary bier, Lowbacca's body resting on delicately arranged wooden planks. His lightsaber resting beneath both hands clasped over his chest. As a family unit, Lowbacca's mother, Kallabow, stepped up to the bier with Mahraccor and Sirrakuk. They stood before Lowbacca's body in silence, their heads bowed.

A breeze fluttered through the understory of the forest, and all at once, a mournful, almost melodic call filled the air. A few seconds later, Sirrakuk and Mahraccor joined Kallabow's animalistic howl, their voices piercing the upper levels of the forests and rippling outwards. A ring of Wookies who were extended family, or family friends, took up the call just as the cry of the original mourners began to fade. A howling cry of sorrow, of regret, warding evil away. As the sounds of the second cry

began to lessen, a third ring of Wookies added their own voices. Then, Kallabow, Mahraccor, and Sirrakuk's voices joined in, followed seconds later by the second group of Wookies. The rumbling cry, uniting everyone, resounded off towering trees, through the darkened, sun-starved surface of the planet, a clear and unmistakable sign of grief. Then, gradually, the sound began to fade, the last hints of sunlight vanishing along with the final note.

Anakin, who had closed his eyes at the start of the mournful group call, released a slow, steady breath as he tried to regain his composure. He had felt the outpouring of emotions at his very core, and despite knowing that he wasn't to blame for Lowbacca's death, it didn't stop him from *feeling* like some part of him was responsible. As Luke Skywalker got up to say a few words about Lowbacca, Cassa plopped Jayce down onto his lap and proceeded to hug his arm tightly to her. Her small face tilted up towards him in distress and letting him know just how low his emotional barriers had become. Tahiri gave them all a one-armed group hug, her own head resting on Anakin's shoulder.

Jacen was the next to speak. "Lowbacca…in the little circle of friends I was a part of, he was always that one constant, the one person you could rely on no matter how insane things got. He was as close as a brother can be, saved my life, Jaina's life, Tenel Ka's life so many times. He was a true Jedi in every sense of the word, right down to fighting with his last breath to protect the defenseless. I know I speak for the rest of my friends, and myself, when I say that he will definitely be missed. His strength, his spirit, and his camaraderie always made the dark times easier. Lowie, if you're looking on us from the great beyond, thank you for being my friend and for helping to shape who I am today."

The funeral continued, with Sirrakuk rounding out the speakers. Luke, with a nod from Mahraccor and Kallabow, gently lowered the torch to Lowbacca's bier. The fire took quickly, orange, red, and yellow flaring and shooting sparks up into the night's sky.

Anakin kept his gaze rooted on the dancing fire, trying to distance himself from the torrent of emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. He, of course, failed, and ended up resting his head atop Tahiri's, rubbing her back and hugging his children to him. The flames crackled, dancing in Anakin's watery blue eyes.

He knew that now was the time for grieving. Once he returned to Denon, to the center of politics and military matters, his life would barely be his own. Again, he focused on his family, drawing on the strength they were lending him and grateful to the Force for bring them into his life.

0-o-V-o-0

The transition from the battlefield back to what could pass as civilian life for a Jedi wasn't as hard for Anakin as he thought it would be. It was just a different set of puzzles that needed to be worked out, a different set of enemies to take down. Even though he was no longer fighting a war in several sectors, the challenges were still just as complicated. The fact that life-or-death no longer hinged upon his every decision, however, definitely helped to ease the stress.

New issues, however, raised that stress level right back up.

One of the first things that had been on the agenda was to shape the Galactic Alliance Guard into an actual organization. The hasty way it was formed in response to the Killik threat had meant that many details had been left out. The fact that nearly all the ships that had been designated for the GAG were destroyed in the fighting against the Killiks meant that it wasn't exactly a fleet any more, not that it had been planned as one. His first month back had been filled with meetings upon meetings with different department heads, trying to secure both their cooperation and support for the 'upstart' security force seen as an extension of Hamner's office. He often left the apartment he shared with his family early in the morning, and came home well after his children were asleep. Slowly but surely, however, progress was being made. The Galactic Alliance Guard was taking shape.

It was now a planetary security force, operating mostly around Denon for the purposes of securing the capital. It was decided early on it wouldn't be a naval force, so had the bare-minimum in terms of space-faring vessels, mostly the surviving ships of the Swarm War. One of Anakin's early victories was earning the support of Galactic Alliance Intelligence Director Belindi Kalenda, ensuring that the GAG would have a strong intelligence apparatus. Keeping its presence and numbers to a minimum, all new GAG agents were hand-picked by Anakin and a trusted circle of high-level officers from military academies GA-wide and existing armed-forces branches.

An unexpected twist in the forming of the GAG was that Anakin had found himself on the High Council of the Galactic Alliance; a position held by the Director of Intelligence, Minister of Communications, Minister of Justice, Supreme Commander of the GA fleets, Senate representative, Chief of State, and the Jedi High Council. Kenth Hamner had justified it, however, by pointing out that the GAG now in charge of the safety of billions and utilized the resources of many departments in the government.

Including the Jedi Order.

The last part of Hamner's statement had upset several of the Jedi High Council members. Grandmaster Luke Skywalker was quick to point out that the Jedi Order was *not* a department in the Galactic Alliance Government. To which Hamner had simply replied. 'Not yet.' Needless to say, his position as head of the GAG was definitely putting Anakin at odds with the Jedi Order. Something made more tenuous when Anakin recruited Waxarn Kel's Death Knights, as well as several other 'gray-minded' Jedi into the Guard.

If he had thought getting the Galactic Alliance Guard established was hard, he had to fight tooth and nail to get just those Jedi in. But he had reasoned that an investigative and security body would be more functional if it also had Force-sensitives within. The Jedi Council fired back by asking what happened to his Jedi-should-distance-themselves –from-the-core-government stance. Anakin countered with the age-old problem of 'to give up power, one must have enough power to give in the first place.' Yes the Jedi needed to separate themselves from the government, but only after ensuring that everything wouldn't fall apart if they did. They held just enough power to have a say on government, but not enough to ensure that ceding that power would cause more harm than good. In the year-plus he had been in the galaxy, Anakin had definitely had time to revise his opinion on the state of affairs, and if the Swarm War was any indicator, things definitely needed to improve.

"Chief of State, what can I do for you?" Anakin said politely as Kenth Hamner entered his high-rise office. Two months into 'officially' helming the Galactic Alliance Guard, he had had a relatively cool relationship with the head of the Galactic Alliance government.

"I assume by now you have received the security assessment of the dissident group opposing the funds being allocated to Coruscant's rebuilding?"

"I have, the local security forces can handle it. Unless they actually break the law, we can't do anything about them. The last I checked, giving HoloNet interviews and organizing mass-protests after receiving the proper permits doesn't qualify."

Kenth took a seat opposite of Anakin's desk without being bidden. "It's vital that we move the government back to Coruscant as soon as we are able. Denon is a symbol of stagnation, of everything wrong with the Omas Administration. Now that we have cut the excess expenditures from the budget, my analysts tell me Coruscant can be re-inhabited within the next two years. The central government can be moved shortly after. Any delays in this reconstruction are complications we don't need."

"I know," Anakin said mildly. "I had my security forces guard that meeting you had with the leaders of the dissident group. They do have several good points. Many Mid-Rim and Colony worlds still need to rebuild not just from the Yuuzhan Vong War, but from the Swarm War as well."
"And they will, just as soon as the central government becomes strong enough to do so," Kenth Hamner frowned. "Director Solo, we can't help the systems furthest from the Core if it makes the Core even weaker than it already is. It would be like giving food to billions of hungry people on another planet, when your own people are starving to death. Even a Jedi wouldn't cut off his own arm to give it to an armless person, if it meant that he couldn't defend the billions of others he serves as well."
"Have you seen the report on the diaspora from Kaikielius?" Anakin said, seemingly changing the topic. "The members of House Vahali are advocating that their right to rule the planet be restored, displacing the current House Praji-run government."
"House Vahali is also opposing the funds being spent on Coruscant," Kenth Hamner said. "Are you saying that this House Vahali is backing the dissident group?"
"Coruscant is also House Praji's old powerbase," Anakin continued in non-answer. "It looks as if a very old family vendetta is being played out. I looked into it. House Vahali ruled Kaikielius until the Empire came and planted the existing government. When Coruscant fell, the rest of Praji relocated to Kaikielius."
"Your point, Director Solo?"
"You try to shut down the dissident group, which probably does have ties to the Vahali, you'll be giving the Imperial-friendly Praji just what they wanted," Anakin deliberately added the descriptor knowing that Hamner was less than pleased with Grand Moff Quille's rapid expansion in the Outer Rim. "Praji will then be able to pick up where it left off on Coruscant and give the Imperial Remnant a strong foot-hold in the politics of the galactic Core."
"What do you suggest then?"
"Make your enemies allies," Anakin said. "Promise House Vahali a cushy spot in Coruscant that will allow them to build a power-base faster than Praji can. With your support, they'd be guaranteed advocates of the Galactic Alliance's agenda in their sphere of influence. This keeps Imperial-leaning Praji confined to Kaikielius, sweeps away an influential source of support for your dissidents, and allows you to continue your efforts to rebuild Coruscant."
"Great, then I'll…."

Anakin held up a hand. "The main drawback is that by denying Imperial supporters in the Core, you'll further alienate the Imperial Remnant, one of the cornerstones of the Galactic Alliance. Without Remnant support, the Outer Rim and Mid-Rim planets they support will have even less of a reason to remain in the Galactic Alliance since you've basically told them to 'get in line' behind the Core and Inner Rim worlds. Even if it delays building for an additional five or so years on top of what your analysts tell you, and you miss the next election by two or more years, I'd suggest partially giving in to some of the dissidents' demands. Even if the Core is strong, if there's no one left to govern, then what was the point?"
"We need Coruscant."
"'We need'?" Anakin raised an eyebrow. "What about 'you need'? Whether Coruscant is rebuilt in two years or ten, it'll still be there. In the meantime we have billions of refugees filling camps and ships across all stretches of the galaxy. You mentioned this in your election campaign, sir. What's more important, those lives or a dead planet?"
"It's not that simple," Hamner shook his head. "Many see Coruscant as a symbol of greater times, of a united galaxy. Many of the politicians today remember going on school trips to see the Coruscanti senate in session, started their political careers because of it. It's a symbol of..."
"Symbols can't run a government or feed the hungry," Anakin cut off. "You need more than symbols if you want this galaxy to experience the Peace of a Millennium that you've been touting."
"Don't lecture me, boy. I've been in politics before you were even a thought on your parents' mind," Kenth Hamner snapped back. "We need symbols to rally the people. You should know being a living legend in your own right. Wasn't it you who brought the Jedi into the Vong War? You who united the dissident Vong and had them turn against their masters because they saw you as a god?"
"Goddess, kind of," Anakin interrupted mildly. "Yun Ne'shel is technically hermaphroditic."
"That's beside the point," Hamner said impatiently. "The point is, Anakin, the people need something to believe in. Or like you, someone to believe in. Belief in something greater than they are. If they have that, then they can endure any hardship. With Coruscant rebuilt, businesses will prosper, the government will be reborn, and everyone will look to brighter times. With Coruscant in disrepair, all anyone will see is a broken galaxy, a broken government, an inept Jedi Order that couldn't even protect the capital of this galaxy. So what if we have billions of refugees out there? They've managed for this long, a year or two longer won't hurt them."

"I just gave you my two credits on your situation," Anakin shrugged, not wanting to get drawn into the political fight. "But the GAG will *not* be used to arrest or harass the anti-Coruscant dissidents. It would be highly illegal if we did."
"Unless they break the law," Hamner said evenly.
"Any crimes, will of course be fully investigated," Anakin said, meeting the older Jedi's stare.
"I'd expect nothing less."
"Was that all you wanted to talk to me about, Chief of State?"
"One other thing. How are the efforts going to clear the undercity of the Killik presence?"
"Smoothly," Anakin answered. "The teams are introducing the Alderaanian insecticide into the lower vents and expect Denon to be Killik-free by year's end."
"I have received reports that some ships being allowed to leave Denon were crewed by Joiners."
"Ferrying Killiks who accepted the offer to leave Denon and rejoin the rest of the Killik hives in the Unknown Region."
"That wasn't what I had ordered."
"It's a peaceful situation that allows us to avoid genocide," Anakin replied back. "You should see a report on the HoloNet later this week praising your wisdom on such an action."
"Good job," Kenth said with a tight smile.
"The GAG is a reflection of your office after all."
"Then keep up the good work, Director Solo."
"Can I ask what you intend to do about the dissidents?" Anakin spoke up. "I might have to allocate resources one way or another depending on your actions and would like an advanced notice."
"I will…take your advice," Kenth said bitingly. "I'll divert some funds to help restore Outer Rim and Mid-Rim worlds over the next several years. I will have to talk with the analysts, but I think we can afford that much."
"And the Vahali-Praji situation?"
"I'll give Kaikielius back to the Vahali family, but will allow Praji to start up on Coruscant. Since it won't be ready for settlement for at least half a decade now, I have that long to come up with further plans for them. Keep your enemies closest to you, right?"
Anakin inclined his head at Hamner's cold smile, his own blue eyes icy in nature. "Exactly, Chief of State. Exactly."
0-o-VI-o-0
For the first time in two months, Anakin managed to leave his work at a reasonable hour. It had been a conscious choice to do so after his

meeting with Hamner left a bad taste in his mouth. Two months of maneuvering and counter-maneuvering. Who knew that taking up a military post would actually involve so much politics? Or that half of those political battles would actually come from the Jedi Order he was supposed to serve and support. In any case, he couldn't believe that he actually missed Yuuzhan Vong point-and-kill-or-threaten-with-death politics.

Exiting his speeder outside the tower apartment complex that serviced many politicians and military officials, Anakin saw a street vendor nearby. Deciding to take a small detour—the sun was still up so he didn't think that he was *too* late—he made a stop at the vendor.

"Hello, young man!" The vendor, an older woman greeted. "Looking for something for your girlfriend?"

"Wife," Anakin smiled. The sign on the vendor's cart read *Outer Rim Treasures, imports from the far reaches of the galaxy.*

"I have a nice jewelry selection over here," the woman gestured to a section of her cart. "I have earrings, rings, necklaces."

"My wife doesn't really wear jewelry."

"Lucky man."

"She's nice to my wallet like that," Anakin chuckled.

"Well, let's not break tradition then. I have a nice amber locket, made from the sap of plants from Saleucami. A Bondanian crystal-shard bracelet. Oh, I know, how about this nice necklace? Made from Tatooine silica, supposed to resemble the two suns setting, or was it rising, on the horizon. Never been off-world myself so I just take the catalogue's description of it."

Anakin glanced at the necklace. A simple cloth-like cord held a trio of silica discs half melted into each other, one red, one white, and one yellow. Nodding slowly, he then turned his attention to the bracelet. It was also cloth-like in nature, with several different crystals woven into it. "I'll take the necklace and bracelet. How much do you want for them."

"Oh, please," the woman shook her head. "Consider it on the house, Mr. Solo. Yes, I know who you are. Your face has been plastered on every HoloNet channel since you came back from the bug war."

"I couldn't…"

"My son served with you in both the Killik and Vong wars under Admiral Bres-Durron," the woman said with a smile. "You brought him home safely for both. I can't ask any more."

"That was mostly Bres-Durron's doing."

"He told me what it was like for both. No one should have made it back against the numbers you were facing, but you somehow managed to do it. This galaxy owes you several times over."
"Thank you," Anakin managed to keep his composure.
The vendor pressed the two pieces of jewelry into his hands. "No, thank *you*. Compared to these trinkets, what is all that life worth?"
"Have a good day," Anakin breathed out, using a slight of hand to deposit a small amount of credits into the woman's 'tip-jar'.
"You as well."
Feeling slightly better, Anakin couldn't help but smile as he continued his way up to his family's home. As he exited the turbolift, he felt a spike of excitement radiate from his apartment, and his smile grew wider. Even before he reached the apartment door, it opened, and a small blond blur shot out of it.
"Daddy!" Her Force-assisted baby-leap meant he didn't even have to bend down to pick her up as she shot straight into his arms.
"Hey there," Anakin laughed.
"You've not been home in *forever*!" Casa stressed, pouting. "I thought when you came back from the war you said you'd be home!"
"I thought so too," Anakin sighed, kissing the top of her head and shifting so that he was carrying her with one arm. He glanced back towards the apartment and saw his wife standing them with a whimsical expression as she held onto both of Jayce's arms.
With an almost mischievous smirk, she leaned down to whisper something to their son, then let go of his hands. On his own, Jayce happily ran as fast as his tiny legs could carry him through the hallway, making all sorts of happy noises as he did. Unable to make the Force-jump in time, the one-and-half year-old glommed onto Anakin's leg, looking up at his dad and giggling like crazy. The fact that he was in just his underwear made the scene all the more memorable to Anakin.
"Hello to you too," Anakin laughed, using his other arm to lift up his son. He then carried both of his children back to the apartment, making sure to give Tahiri a quick kiss as he did.
"Nice to have you back at a reasonable hour," Tahiri smiled, reaching up to caress his face.
"Yeah, I almost forgot what the sun looks like as it sets," Anakin gestured out the window as evening light slowly filled the sky.
"I can draw you a picture of a setting sun, and you can take it to work so you won't forget," Cassa said earnestly. "Or you can not-work so late and see the sun set more often."

"Both great ideas," Anakin complimented. He deposited his children onto the couch and lightly tapped Cassa's nose "And I'll definitely take you up on the offer for that picture."
"Do you want a Denon sunset, a Zonama sunset, a Tatooine sunset…"
"Tatooine sunset? How do you know what that looks like?"
"Mommy's been teaching me Sand-People talk," Cassa said eagerly. She then proceeded to make several guttural sounds not unlike a Tusken Raider. Jayce, who seemed to think it funny, let out more giggles, then made several eager imitations of the sound Cassa had just made. "I said 'and all about Tatooine'." Cassa finished with a grin. "She said we can visit when you're able to get time off."
"Sure," Anakin smiled. "Oh, and that reminds me, I got a gift for you and mom." He then unslung his pack and pulled out his recent purchases.
"A gift?" Cassa's green eyes went round as he attached the bracelet around her small wrist. "For me?"
"Yup," Anakin patted her head. "The crystals in that bracelet are shards of the same type used in lightsabers."
"Wizard! What did you get for mommy?"
Anakin chuckled at Cassa's enthusiasm and stood to affix the necklace around Tahiri's neck. He shared a chaste kiss with his wife, affectionately rubbing her stomach as he embraced her from behind."Just a little silica necklace. Wanted to let the both of you know that even if I'm stuck at work, I still love you bunches."
"And Jayce? What does he get?" Cassa said picking up her baby brother and holding him up to Anakin and Tahiri like some type of offering.
"Open my pack, Cass."
Cassa nodded and set her brother down, gasping and smiling as she pulled out a stuffed Bantha. Immediately she held it up to her brother. "Here, Jayce, this is for you. Daddy got it for you."
Jayce immediately gripped the Bantha in his hands and began walking around the apartment with it. Cassa went skipping to her bedroom, admiring the bracelet on one wrist and talking with her pet amphistaff on the other.
"I guess they like it," Tahiri smiled.
"Well I could have gotten Jayce the stuffed *rakamat*. Glad I chose right."
"They have a stuffed *rakamat*?" Tahiri's eyebrows shot up.
"Yeah, that was my reaction too," Anakin laughed, spinning his wife around to give her another kiss. "Apparently they're trying to appeal to the male gender and more warrior-minded female tots."

"So how was work?" Tahiri asked, stepping away to gaze up at him with searching eyes. "Must have been something to get you home early."
"Chief of State just driving me mynocky." Anakin said, shaking his head. "Needed some time to cool off before I gave orders I'd probably regret. How about you?"
"I've managed to form an informal leading council with the heads of each of the major Yuuzhan Vong colonies," Tahiri said with a sigh, looking as tired as Anakin felt as she sat down at a chair at the dining table. "The fact that the Bothan supporters are *still* continuing their war of annihilation, and are reinforced by the forces returning from the Swarm War, means that the colonies are now increasingly vulnerable to bio-weapons. It's a mess."
"Sure sounds like it," Anakin massaged her shoulders. "Want me to get dinner ready?"
"Your parents and your brother are coming over," Tahiri said, shaking her head. "And Mara called just before you got back and said that her side of the family might be able to make it too, but they'll be running a little late. Apparently they've heard how hard we've been working and want to stage an intervention before we work ourselves to death. I guess I *have* been kind of using the 'free-baby-sitter' service a lot recently."
"*We* have," Anakin exhaled. "I really should come home early more often."
"The galaxy might fall apart," Tahiri deadpanned.
"The puzzle's always more fun if it's more complicated. So when are…" Anakin trailed off, sensing his brother's arrival along with that of his mother. Which meant dad was also on the way up. "Never mind.'
"If you can get the dishes to set the table, I'll try to corral the kids."
"Better idea," Anakin grinned. "Hey Cass! Want to show mom your control?"
Cassa came bounding back into the room. "Huh?"
"The dishes, think you can get them here without breaking any?"
"I *know* I can," Cassa said determinedly. "Last time was just an accident."
"Last time?" Tahiri raised her eyebrows and looked at her husband.
"Explain later," Anakin said sheepishly. "Go on then, or do you want me to get started?"
Cassa looked at the closed cupboards and bit her lower lip as she reached out both her small arms towards them. Scrunching her forehead in concentration, she squeezed her eyes shut. The Force darted from her small form and yanked the doors open with a thunk.

"A bit too much," Anakin counseled.
Cassa nodded silently. Then reached out for the neatly stacked ceramic dishes. Slowly, a stack of three plates began to vibrate, shaking and clacking as they did.
"You can do it," Anakin urged. "I know you can."
Cassa made a 'come here' motion with her hands, and the plates levitated out of the cupboard in an unstable stack. Tahiri couldn't help but hold her breath, torn between yelling at Anakin and pride for her daughter's obvious skill with the Force. After several long tense seconds, Cassa managed to deposit the three plates onto the table. Her eyes flew open and she beamed.
"See! I did it! I did it!"
"Think you can get the cups too…"
"Anakin!" Tahiri said with an exasperated laugh. "Why don't you help her out? I'll go get Jayce ready for meals then. He seems as allergic to clothes as my feet are to shoes."
Anakin looked to Cassa, who did the classic Solo-shrug right back at him. The two then reached out towards the cupboard once more, and soon had a stream of dishes floating across the room. Then, deciding that the direct route was a bit 'boring', they started floating the dishes around the room too. Anakin and Cassa both sat in the middle of the sitting room, in deep concentration as they made multiple orbits of dishes and utensils, nearly resembling the lines of speeder traffic outside the apartment.
That was the scene that greeted Han, Leia, Jacen, and C3PO as they entered the apartment. Tahiri, holding Jayce in her arms as she let her in-laws in, was grinning from ear to ear as she watched her husband and daughter. "Hiya, we'll be ready for dinner in a moment."
"My word!" C3PO gasped as a flying saucer passed by over his head. The exclamation broke Cassa and Anakin's concentration, and everyone flinched as several plates, cups, and utensils clattered and crashed noisily to the ground.
"Ooops," Cassa blinked. She quickly looked to her dad. "That doesn't count right? They distracted me."
"A Jedi must always concentrate through distractions," Anakin said in an imitation of the Jedi Masters of old.
"You dropped the plates too," Cassa said accusingly.
"I'm not a very good Jedi," Anakin laughed, helping her to her feet. "Come on, lets get the mop and brooms."
Anakin began to reach out along with his daughter, but Tahiri stepped between them. "That's enough using the Force for mundane things, you two. We all know that if I let you use the Force we'd have mops

and brooms dancing through this apartment and we'd never get to dinner. Go get the mops and brooms and clean the old fashioned way."
"Yes, Tahiri,"
"Yes, mommy."
The two, properly chastened, hurried off to clean up the mess and finish setting the tables.
At that, Leia and Han couldn't help but let out the laughs they were trying to hold back. Tahiri grinned sheepishly. "I did tell Anakin that you guys were coming over."
"It's nice to see him like that," Leia reassured Tahiri.
"Here I am trying to teach Cassa about the Sand People and Tatooine and Anakin teaches her how to abuse the Force," Tahiri smiled. "I shudder to think what he'll teach Jayce when that guy grows up."
"Which guy are you referring to?" Han said dryly. "Anakin or my grandson?"
"You're not one to talk, dad," Jacen said, helping set the remaining dishes.
"I am not quite sure why I was invited along," C3PO said, patting the napkin he had just neatly laid out. "I am incapable of eating and I see no need for a translator droid."
"You're family, Golden-Rod," Han rolled his eyes. "This is a family meal. Even Jaina's going to be sitting in."
"She is?" Tahiri perked up.
"Luke just confirmed it," Leia nodded. "He and Mara are bringing over a hypercomm holo-unit so Jaina and Jagged can have dinner with us."
"She'll be able to meet Jayce and Cassa then," Tahiri said brightly.
"Earplugs?" Anakin asked his brother.
"Huh?"
"For the high-pitched female squeals that will take place when that happens," Anakin answered, promptly earning a whack on each shoulder from his mother and wife.
"You need to train him better, Tahiri," Leia said with a laugh.
"I'm trying, believe me," Tahiri grinned, hugging her husband's arm. She glanced over to Cassa. "Hey, do you want to meet your auntie? She's daddy's big sister."
Cassa nodded eagerly, her head bobbing up and down so fast it looked as if it might bobble right off. "I can't wait! She has to be a nice person, right? Daddy's big brother is nice and funny, and if Jaina's his twin then she'll be just like him."
"*Look* similar," Jacen laughed, pulling the energetic Cassa onto his lap. "Jaina and I actually have pretty different personalities."
"But she's nice, right?"

"Yes, she's nice," Jacen relented.
The doorbell chimed.
"I got it," Han said. He let the Skywalkers in.
Ben and Janek entered first, with R2D2 in tow, all three were carrying various bags filled with pre-made food. Mara and Luke came next, each carrying half of the hypercomm holo-system that would allow Jaina to join the meal.
"Okay boys, go ahead and set out the food," Mara directed her children. "You too, Ar-Two."
"Can I help?" Cassa volunteered.
"Sure," Mara smiled warmly.
Cassa began to pour drinks, tiptoeing to get the container over the rim of the cups. "Uncle Jacen, isn't Auntie Tenie going to join?"
Jacen's smile became slightly forced. "I don't think so. She's a very busy person, Cass. Besides, it's in the early hours of the morning on Hapes right now. She's probably still sleeping."
"Shows how much the senate-representative for the Jedi Order knows," Mara said with a superior smirk. "There's a reason I'm lugging around *two* transmitters after all."
Jacen's jaw dropped. "What?"
"I put in a few calls with her Highness," Mara patted her nephew in sympathy. "It might be just before dawn over there, but she wanted to be in on this meal."
Anakin blinked. "Wow. What would you guys have done if I was working late as usual?"
"Would have sent 3PO to guilt-trip you into coming over," Han answered. "But apparently the Force likes you better than that."
"Okay, let me get this stuff plugged in. Han, want to give me a hand?" Luke said, gesturing to the Solo patriarch. Luke then smiled over at Tahiri and Anakin. "You don't mind a small spike in your utility bills do you?"
"Not for family," Tahiri shook her head, her concentration mostly diverted to trying to get Jayce into the child's seat. It didn't help that the one-and-half year old was excited at seeing everyone in one place and kept wanting to run around to each person. "Jayce! Play later. Food now!"
"I think I got it," Han said, flipping a couple of switches. "I got it!"
The hypercomm system hummed to life, the lights flickering on as the machine activated.
"Got it over here too." Luke finished with the holo-units. "Let's see if they're ready."

"Boys, wait until everyone is seated," Mara admonished, seeing both Ben and Janek already beginning to fill their plates.
"I'm hungry," Janek complained.
"We're waiting," Mara said in the 'mother' voice, and both Janek and Ben nodded meekly.
Cassa was already sitting, her legs kicking freely as she excitedly awaited her first live conversation with her aunt. She looked to Ben and Janek. "You've met Auntie Jaina right? What's she like, is she funny, is she smart, does she speak a lot of languages?"
Ben blinked at the rapid spew. Then organized his answers. "Yes, yes, very, I don't know."
"How many…"
"That's enough questions for now," Anakin said gently.
Cassa pouted, but nodded and instead picked up a fork and child's knife in each hand. "The food smells so good."
"We've got an incoming call," Han called out. He fiddled with another switch, but then the hypercomm unit died. With a scowl, he pounded the device with his fist, and it started up again. The connected holo-device glowed, and projected the images of Jagged Fel and Jaina Solo into two seats deliberately left open for them.
"*Hey guys!*" Jaina waved.
"Auntie!" Cassa beamed.
"*You must be Cassa! Wow, you look just like your mom.*"
"Uh huh, people tell me that all the time. Well, not all the time, but whenever I meet new people and mommy is standing with me they tell me that. I know I have the same color hair as mommy, and her eyes too, and I also don't like shoes. Oh, you can meet my pet amphistaff, this is Sa'il. I found him on Zonama. He wasn't ready to fall off the stalk though so I…" Cassa trailed off realizing that everyone was looking at her with smiles on their faces. "Talking too much again?"
"No, go ahead sweetie," Leia smiled. "Here, you can take my seat so you'll sit right next to your auntie."
"You're the best grandma ever," Cassa hopped off, gave Leia a tight hug, and then sat next to the holographic image of her aunt. The two proceeded to chat, well, Cassa proceeded to chat and Jaina continued to listen with a bright smile on her face. "…And my little brother Jayce is over there in the baby seat. Did you know that his first word was my name? He…"
"How are things in the Empire, Jagged?" Anakin asked the other hologram.
"*Challenging,"* Jagged answered mildly. "*Keeps life interesting.*"
"I know what you mean," Anakin laughed.

"Got another incoming call," Mara announced.
Jacen released a slow breath, his own rapidly beating heart betraying the cool he was trying to maintain. A second later, the other holo-unit activated, and Tenel Ka's hologram shimmered into view. Seated on her lap was Allana Djo, staring at the blue light of the holo-emitter on her end with wide-eyed curiosity.
"*Greetings from Hapes*," Tenel Ka acknowledged everyone with a regal tilt of her head.
"Great you could make it, your Majesty," Han smiled. He then extended his arms to everyone. "Well, looks like the gang's all here."
"Now can we eat?" Janek asked, seemingly more excited at that prospect than anything else.
"Yes, Janek," Mara sighed in resignation. "Now we can eat."
The others at the table laughed, broad grins and bright eyes everywhere to be seen. Even 3PO was in a lively conversation with R2, animatedly waving his hands about. And as the last of the Denon sunlight disappeared over the horizon, the Solo-Skywalker family shared one more moment of peace in the natural chaos of the galaxy.
0-o-Chapter End-o-0

act 4

Hapes
0-o-I-o-0
"All hail Tenel Ka Chume Ta'Djo. All hail *chume'da* Allana Ta'Djo."
The herald's call echoed in the rebuilt Lorell Hall, heard by the many hundreds of Hapan nobles and politicians who were in attendance. As one, the crowd dropped to bended knee, the magnificent wooden doors of the hall opening soundlessly to let in the bright Hapan sunlight. Copper-colored hair shimmering in the bright light, her clothing befitting of the member of the Royal House of Djo, Tenel Ka entered with her wide-eyed daughter ensconced in her arm. It was hard for the Queen Mother to believe that it had been almost a year since she had given birth to her daughter, just short of a year since the entire political landscape of Hapes had been turned on its head by the Killiks. But she had no time to dwell on those thoughts as sharp gray eyes swept the hall.
Trumpets heralded her arrival, the atmosphere not quite festive but not solemn either.
The Queen Mother had gone out with her entire personal guard, and had come back with only five badly damaged Nova-class battle-cruisers and a handful of support ships. Entire Houses had fought

alongside the Queen Mother, and died as well. The royal court was noticeably more roomy than usual, as was the absence of a good many nobles who had gone off with Tenel Ka to battle the Killiks.

The Hapan Royal Navy as a whole was a pale shadow of itself. So much of the Hapan military had been lost in the almost back-to-back warring that even the normally hawkish nobility had become gun-shy. With the Queen Mother's orders to rebuild the infrastructure instead of creating ships to replace those lost in the Yuuzhan Vong and Killik wars, Hapes was thriving but more vulnerable than ever.

Not that anyone would say it out loud. Not when the infrastructure projects and trade with other systems had wealth pouring into the Consortium for families of all political alignments. The new-found wealth was reflected in the different clothing many of the nobles sported—from chic Coruscanti core styles to exotic Kiffu ensembles and military new-Imperial—if the style was in among the elite of some renown sector, then it could be seen in the court.

A respectful silence followed the last ringing note, Tenel Ka walking at a measured pace along the main thoroughfare, the crowd rising as she passed by like a living wave. Her gaze continued to sweep back and forth along the crowd, mentally cataloging the many faces that were absent, the many faces that were new.

Out of the entire crowd, only two of the faces guaranteed any sort of friendship, guaranteed that her feelings could be kept secret. Both Zekk and Jacen were towards the front of the crowd, the only males apart from Isolder in such a position. Zekk was House Zel's personal escort, and Jacen was the father of the *chume'da*. They smiled faintly upon eye-contact, but otherwise showed no reaction as she passed them.

"Welcome home, daughter," Isolder greeted.

Tenel Ka almost did a double-take at how tired and worn down her father looked in person. Between the gray hair, wrinkles, and his shorter-than-she-remembered stature, she couldn't remember the last time he had looked so *old*. She caught herself, however, and offered a courteous tilt of her head. "It is good to be home, among family and friends."

"It is," Isolder agreed. He stepped off the royal platform. "The throne is yours once more, *Chume*. Rule well, rule long."

Tenel Ka released a long, slow breath, relying on the innocent warmth of her daughter tucked against her body to relax her nerves. After five straight months of nothing but warring and death, how was one supposed to return to 'life as usual' in the static courts of Hapes? Battle maneuvers, life and death decisions for hundreds of thousands in the

span of a single second, swapped for court intrigue and the petty games nobles who'd never left the Hapes Cluster thought made them important.
Again Tenel Ka focused on her daughter, her natural curiosity as she peeked at the crowd from over her mother's shoulder, her small heart beating strongly in her chest. Tenel Ka stepped up to the throne and sat in a smooth series of motions, bowing her head slightly so Isolder could place the Hapan crown back onto her head.
"You have done well in keeping Hapes in one piece, Crown Prince Isolder," Tenel Ka said aloud. "We thank you for your services to the Consortium while We were away."
"You honor me," Isolder bowed and then stepped to the side.
With the formulaic transition finished, Tenel Ka turned her attention to the crowd. "The threat the Killiks posed to this galaxy, to the Consortium, is finally ended. Though the end did not come without great cost, We will honor all those who died ensuring that the rest of us would be able to live in peaceful and prosperous times."
0-o-II-o-0
Taryn Zel and Zekk were seated on the roof of the Hapan Palace, watching as the sun slowly sunk below the horizon. The month they had been back had been filled with all sorts of political maneuvers, all sorts of the usual intrigue the Royal Guard normally had to deal with. Tenel Ka's return, though not unexpected, spoiled the plans of those hoping she'd perish in the war. Jacen wasn't able to escape Hapan politics either, and had to deal with countless requests for 'his virile seed' and offers to be consort to one House or another.
Mass memorial services to the hundreds of thousands of Hapans who had died in the fighting coincided with the more private funerals of higher-born families. All united by the fact that they were Hapans who had given their lives not just for the Consortium, but for the greater galaxy. The realization that they were truly part of something bigger was slowly sinking in.
But then again, the following days were still filled with much of the same. Nobles, more rich than ever thanks to the trade deals, schemed. Commoners went about their lives oblivious to the games the nobles played, but intrigued by the influx of foreign goods hitting the markets. And the royals did their best to balance their personal desires with the desires of sixty-three star-systems. It seemed like nothing had changed at all in the five-plus months they had all been gone.
In his time in the Consortium, while Taryn continued her duties as part of the *Chume'doro,* Zekk had returned to what he was good at; helping displaced refugees receive the help they might have had trouble

getting otherwise. He could be frequently seen at the filled-to-the-brim orphanages in Tenel Ka Chume'dan as he did his best to show the kids that they hadn't been forgotten either. Though the fighting against the Killiks never truly breached the city walls, the number of dead from the Yuuzhan Vong and Swarm War combined had left many children without parents. Being an orphan himself, Zekk could definitely relate to them.

Working with the orphaned children made him reflect on his own life as well, making him marvel at how he somehow managed to go from street-rat hiding in the alley-ways to Jedi Knight residing in the Queen Mother's palace. It was almost surreal for him, and he had one person in particular for making Hapes feel like a home.

"Taryn?" Zekk said softly, his forearms folded atop his knees.

"Hmmm?"

Zekk continued to watch the amber and orange orb sink in the distance. "How many sunsets did we see together…you know…before the war?"

Taryn shook her head and rested it on his shoulder, hugging one of his arms as she did. "Doesn't matter."

"It does to me." He still didn't know how much of his memories, if any, he could recover from his pre-Joining days and that worried him slightly. He remembered all the practical things, like his time in the Shadow Academy, his training as a Jedi, his piloting skills. But the more personal memories were either gone or a fuzzy haze that vanished every time he tried to focus on them.

"It's in the past Zekk," Taryn said softly, the pad of her thumb rubbing the outside of his hand. "What should matter is how many more Hapan sunsets we'll see together in the future. How many times we'll get up early and greet the sun as it rises again. Sure, you might have lost most of your memories of us, that just gives us an excuse to make new ones. Even without the part of you the bugs took away, you're still Zekk. Still…"

"Still what?" Zekk asked when Taryn trailed off and looked down at her feet as if trying to collect her thoughts.

Taryn replied by gently cupping his face and kissing him slow and long. One of his own hands came up to entangle itself in her flaming red hair as he pressed his own lips against hers with equal emotion. When they parted, Taryn smiled almost peacefully at him. "The man I love, what else?"

Zekk felt his heart thump loudly in his chest. He knew, just from the fragmented memories he did have, that Taryn was still the only person to tell him 'I love you.' From his time in the Shadow Academy,

throughout the Jedi Academy, he had never really felt the level of emotion for him that was now burning freely from the beautiful young woman before him.
He knew from the almost serene expression on her face that it was not the first time she had admitted such feelings to him. He felt the same for her. Then, not knowing when he had last reciprocated those feelings, he cupped her face and gave her an equally slow and long kiss.
They parted very reluctantly. "I love you too, Lady Zel."
Taryn's gray eyes shined with unguarded emotion. He shifted, pulling her so that her back was resting against his chest, the tall warrior woman ensconced comfortably in his arms.
"So, how many more sunsets do you think we'll see, Zekk?" Taryn whispered softly, the sun now a third of the way beneath the horizon, the ambient green glow of the Transitory Mist slowly regaining prominence.
He rested his head on her shoulder, their cheeks touching as their hands laced their fingers together. "Many more, I hope. Many, many more."
"I…I feel the same way," Taryn murmured. They sat like that for a while, the warm night air keeping them comfortable and content in the presence of the other.
As the sun almost disappeared beneath the distant lands, he sensed a shift in her emotions as hints of nervousness and fear escaped her, and he pulled back slightly. "Taryn?"
Taryn licked her lips, spinning around to face him on her knees. She looped her arms over his shoulders and leaned forward so that their foreheads were touching. "You know I'm not the type of girl to give my heart lightly, right? Once I give it, no one else is going to have it. I know that you have Jedi duties and all and that you'll probably have to leave again pretty soon to save the galaxy or something. Of course I'll still be here guarding my cousin and the *chume'da*, but…"
"You're rambling, Taryn," Zekk said faintly. "What's wrong, why are you shaking so much?"
"Because I love you, Jedi Knight Zekk, and for once I want to use my royal privileges and tell your Jedi Order off for sending you on the other side of the galaxy when I really want you here, at my side for the rest of my life!" Taryn managed to get out in a mix between a yell, laugh, and panicked spew. "I know how short life is, and how suddenly one of us might die, so I want us to have every moment this galaxy is going to give us because you never know when you'll wake up one day and realize that your best friend and the one you wanted to spend the rest

of your life with is no longer with you because the Force wanted him more. And…and I've already lost mom, and dad, and I would have lost Trista too, several times over, but you keep us alive and happy and I don't want…don't want…"
Zekk pulled her to his chest, her body quivering as she just trailed off and gripped his robes tightly. He could feel the tears he was sure Taryn would never shed openly, soak the front of his Jedi robes. In the background, the sun finally dipped below the horizon, the sky now a blaze of viridian and aqua. "I love you Taryn Zel, that's never going to change. I'm sure of it. The bugs wiped my mind of all that made me me, took away any memory I had of our past time together. Yet I fell in love with you all over again."
"Can the Force give you to me?" Taryn whispered softly, keeping a cheek pressed against his chest as she loosely held him in turn. "I've never asked for anything, didn't want the privilege that comes with being a Royal. So do you think the Force will be good enough to give you to me, free of charge?"
"I'm not sure about the Force," Zekk said. "But I *am* yours, Lady Zel."
Taryn's gray eyes flicked upwards to his face. "Marry me."
Zekk blinked, then looked down. "Taryn?"
"Marry me. Officially become a member of House Zel, I mean it."
"I was a street kid and am an outsider Jedi. The nobles won't even accept Jacen as Tenel Ka's consort, and he's a Solo. To them, he's just a sperm donor. You'd be ruining your…"
"And I told you, I couldn't give a womrat's backside about what the nobles think of me! I'm never going to be Queen Mother anyways and I'm part of the royal family so they can stuff their complaints. Now are you going to marry me or not?"
Zekk couldn't help but laugh at the almost child-like petulant tone in her voice. "When we tell our future kids how you landed your husband, they're going to think you don't have a single romantic bone in your body."
Taryn blushed, then blinked. "So it's a 'yes'?"
"It's a yes, Lady Zel." Zekk confirmed, the decision simple for him.
Taryn's reaction was to suddenly push him down onto his back, straddle him, and then kiss the living daylights out of him. Zekk definitely didn't complain, wrapping his own arms around her as he returned the kiss with equal fervor. Above, the stars blinked merrily, the undulating currents of the Transitory Mist streaming through the night's sky.
0-o-III-o-0

Jacen Solo felt as if his face were burst from the smile he was wearing as his nearly one-year old daughter crawled happily towards him, a stuffed Rancor toy clutched in one hand. About half-way to him, she appeared to push herself off the ground onto her two legs. She toddled forward a couple of steps, before overbalancing and falling on her well-padded, diapered rear. A look of surprise accompanied the fall, then she just giggled and resumed crawling across the rug-covered floor.
"She's amazing," Jacen chuckled, holding up a stuffed Nexu for his daughter and a holo-cam in the other. He pretended to walk the Nexu across the floor in front of him. "Hey, Allana, look what I got for you. Meow!"
Allana appeared to forget all about the Rancor, dropping it without care, as she motored her way in a combination of walking and crawling to get the new toy. But then, half-way to her dad, she seemed to remember the Rancor and looked back over her shoulder. Seeing the Rancor on the other side of the room, Allana pouted, then overbalanced again and fell back down.
"I will get it for you," Tenel Ka started to move over, only to see the stuffed toy fly across the room into her now giggling daughter's arms.
"Well, I guess that answers the question as to whether or not she'll be a powerful Jedi," Tenel Ka couldn't help but laugh along with the rest of her family. Her daughter, gnawing on the top of the Rancor's head, blinked in curiosity. "Don't worry about it, Allana. You will be surrounded by friends and family, always."
Jacen sat down in front of Allana, handing off the holo-cam to Tenel Ka as he brought the Nexu forward. "This is a Nexu." Jacen instructed. "It's a herbivore and normally found in…."
"Nanananana," Allana reached for the toy while swinging her Rancor up and down, seemingly not caring about what her dad had to say.
"Okay, we'll call her Nanana," Jacen shrugged, grinning sheepishly at the camera. "A few more years before the creature lessons I guess."
"Probably for the best," Tenel Ka said with mock sarcasm. "I recall you keeping crystal snakes and other potentially lethal creatures in your room on Yavin."
"They were harmless unless harassed by anyone," Jacen protested, surrendering the cat and picking up the saliva-slickened Rancor. He made several roaring noises, manipulating the creature's arms. This caused Allana to burst into giggles, and she promptly grabbed the Rancor again, as if expecting it to continue moving and making sounds. She jerked it up and down for a few moments, then flipped it to the side and went back to her Nexu.

"I thinks she likes the Nexu, more," Tenel Ka observed. Then, sensing her lover's thoughts. "That doesn't mean you will get her one. At least not until she is older."
"Says the Queen Mother with the juvenile Rancor beneath the palace."
"It's not my fault that my mother is Dathomiri and that the Singing Mountain Clan thought it'd be a good gift."
"Nanananana," Allana added to the conversation, twisting the stuffed Nexu in her little hands.
"Exactly," Tenel Ka said royally. "See, she supports me."
"She could have been saying 'daddy's right, listen to him,'" Jacen pointed out.
Tenel Ka was about to reply, when Allana emitted a giant yawn and rubbed at her eyes. Handing the holo-cam back, Tenel Ka gently lifted her daughter off the ground. "You have done well today, Allana. The people of Hapes were all impressed."
Allana was already sleeping before Tenel Ka had finished her sentence.
"Can you believe we made something as amazing as her?" Jacen whispered, standing and recording Tenel Ka as she walked around the room with their daughter.
"She would be amazing," Tenel Ka smiled a private smile up at the camera. "She has you for a father and myself as her mother."
"I think being Queen Mother's gotten to your head a little," Jacen chuckled. He set the camera down on a nearby table and walked over to his lover and daughter. "She's amazing despite having us as her parents."
"And being a Jedi Master has made you a bit too humble," Tenel Ka rejoined, accepting Jacen's chaste kiss. She carried their daughter over to the crib and gently tucked her in.
"With all the politics going on today, we haven't even discussed what we're going to do for tomorrow," Jacen laughed tiredly.
"After over thirty requests in one day to be consort to one woman or another, staying away from court is probably prudent for you," Tenel Ka said evenly. "Even I have limits as to the level of ridiculousness I can tolerate."
"Still mad about that noblewoman, whoever she was, telling me to get a feel of what I could possibly be having on a nightly basis?"
"Well there was her too," Tenel Ka said.
"The woman who cornered me in the bathroom and flat out stated she wanted a quick deposit of my seed?"
"I wasn't counting her among the thirty-plus."
"The coalition of women who are scheming to have me fall for one of them?"

"You laugh now," Tenel Ka said, shaking her head in tired amusement. "That's how all intrigue starts. The Queen Mother allows what seems like a silly idea to continue on for a bit too long. And before you know it, people are trying to assassinate me for a better chance of being impregnated by you."
"Sounds like typical Hapan politics to me," Jacen quipped.
"With the additional enjoyment of being more complicated because Jedi are involved."
"It's probably a good thing I'm leaving after Allana's birthday then," Jacen said, his expression softening. Said birthday wasn't all that far away, meaning he didn't have many days left with his family before the galaxy he had been ignoring took precedence once more.
Tenel Ka swallowed heavily and nodded once. "It will reduce the number of political schemes I have to be aware of by a great deal."
"And give more weight to the fact that I'm a Jedi Master on the High Council and can't show favoritism to any one system or planet," Jacen said very unconvincingly as he stared down at his daughter's sleeping form.
"Yes, it would," Tenel Ka's voice was almost a whisper.
He moved up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "You know I care deeply for you and Allana, would do anything to protect the both of you."
"As I would the two of you," Tenel Ka breathed back. "But we agreed, your place is with Denon, making the entire galaxy a better place. We would only tie you down, hold you back. You are capable of so much good, Jacen Solo. Use that good, make this galaxy a place where fathers don't have to be separated from their daughters to ensure the safety of billions."
"I'll do my best," Jacen kissed the skin between her neck and shoulders. "For you, for Allana. So the both of you can live in a better galaxy."
"And I shall raise her the best I possibly can, for you, and for her sake." Tenel Ka exhaled. She stepped forward and out of his arms. "Perhaps we can take a family outing to the zoo tomorrow. The political-portion of my schedule should only occupy the morning. Barring an extra-galactic invasion, my afternoon should be free enough."
"That sounds like a plan," Jacen agreed, thankful for the change in topic. It wasn't that he wanted to avoid their impending separation, but at the same time dwelling on it wouldn't change anything either. It was pretty clear from his stand point. His place was on Denon, Tenel Ka's was on Hapes and neither could abandon their duty to the billions of lives that relied on the decisions they made.

"Then let us retreat to bed, Jacen," Tenel Ka gestured, as if able to hear his thoughts and feelings. "I wish to make the most of the time we do have so the memories at least will keep me company in trying times."
Jacen took her extended hand. "It would be my honor, Queen Mother."
Together, they walked past the table with the holocam on it, neither aware that it was still on record and had caught the entire conversation. That one day, Allana Djo Solo would be able to see just how much her parents loved her, loved each other, and would use that knowledge to comfort her in the darkest of times.

0-o-IV-o-0

"Taryn," Trista almost groaned, putting a hand to her head and shaking her head at the same time.
"What?" The bright-eyed Hapan warrior princess asked curiously, continuing her patrol with the members of her squad. The fact that she was practically skipping as she hummed a merry tune was not missed by any of those in her squad.
"Can you not look like you've just spent the entire night having really good sex with Wonderknight?" Chiri Aros said, the corners of her lips twitching in amusement. "You're practically glowing, and you've been humming that song throughout the entire patrol!"
"Don't worry, it wasn't really good sex," Taryn said reassuringly over her shoulder.
Chiri's eyes widened and she stopped in place in shock. "You mean Wonderknight can't…"
"It was the most amazing sex ever," Taryn said mildly, not missing a stride. "You know the type that curls your toes and blows your mind, and makes you wish it would never end?"
"Okay, now you're rubbing it in!" Chiri complained. The mechanical sounds of the pistons in her robotic legs accompanying their footsteps across the marbled floor. The only reason why she could stay with the squad was because they were officially at peace-time. The main assignment of their squad was to keep the palace secure, and to protect the Zel twins as well. No matter how impish said twins became.
"Come on, Lady Zel. With Lieutenant Zel and the captain breaking up, you're like the only one of us actually getting any…"
Someone cleared her throat and the others glanced to Hiana. "Lady Zel is not the only one 'getting any'."
"You and the Dathomiri boy?" Chiri raised an eyebrow.
"I can verify that he is most definitely a man," Hiana replied angelically.
"That's it! I say that the rest of us should march up to the *Chume* and demand added benefits for the *Chume'doro*," Chiri grumbled.

"I'm almost afraid to ask," Ryadii Skella said, playing the straight-woman.
"I say that everyone on Alpha Squad gets assigned their own Wonderknight for the purposes of better coordination with the Jedi Order, additional protection against Force-sensitive assassins, morale maintenance, and stress relief."
"I don't think she'll be too convinced about that last reason," team medic Mirala Chell giggled.
"But she'll empathize," Chiri said. "And just think of it, our Houses will then have Jedi-heirs and kick the butts of all the other Houses."
"I think we'll have better luck petitioning for Jedi Solo's seed," comm-specialist Anyasin commented.
"Way to redirect the conversation, sister," Trista arched an eyebrow. "Would you like to tell the rest of the squad and myself why you had the most mind-blowing sex last night?"
Taryn blinked as if that was an absurd question. "Because it happens every time I'm with Zekk?"
"Lady Zel, even if I'm supposed to protect you, I can't promise that my mechanical hands won't suddenly malfunction and find themselves around your throat," Chiri glowered.
Taryn grinned broadly, taking point with a definite spring in her steps.
"You sure you have no idea?" Chiri glanced to Trista, who shook her head in bewilderment.
Hiana, however, narrowed her eyes, then joined Taryn in front. "Congratulations."
"What are you saying?" Taryn asked, betraying nothing.
"Guessed it was the right thing to say. Tell the others. It will be good for morale. That is an order," Hiana urged monotonously.
"Fine," Taryn glanced over her shoulder. "Jedi Knight Zekk is House Zel's Jedi."
"We all know that," Ryadii said in confusion.
"Officially," Taryn added, beaming.
It took a second for that to sink in, during which time Taryn continued her patrol while the others momentarily ground to a halt.
"You realize how she tells us this when we're in the middle of a patrol and can't mob her with questions?" Anyasin groaned, resuming her pace.
"I think she planned it that way." Mirala added, looking put out.
"So, is that why you were congratulating me?" Taryn looked to the sniper once Hiana had drawn even again. "You guessed it?"
Hiana blinked. "I assumed he got you pregnant."
This time Taryn did miss her step, her cheeks becoming bright red.

"What? Isn't that the result of multiple nights of amazing sex?" Hiana asked a bit too innocently.
"Captain Roh, you're my new best friend!" Chiri laughed with the rest of the squad.
Hiana shared a small smile with the flushed Taryn. "Thank you sergeant for helping me raise unit morale, carry on."
The sniper then resumed her place in the middle of the patrol and was replaced by Trista.
"Congratulations," Trista said softly, her eyes glimmering as she took her sister's hand.
"He's staying Trist, he's staying for me, for us," Taryn breathed out.
"And his duties as a Jedi?" Trista asked.
"He's…he said he'd talk with Jacen. Said that he could probably do more good concentrating his efforts on one part of the galaxy, than spreading himself out to all its corners."
Trista suddenly spun in front of Taryn and gave her a tight hug. "I'm so happy for you, sister."
Surprised at first, Taryn returned the hug, her own eyes squeezing shut as the grin—the one that hadn't been able to leave her face since she had awoken—persisted. "Future is looking bright for us, sis."
"Yes," Trista nodded, stepping back and looking like a mirror image of her twin with a matching smile. "It is."
Inside the palace, Zekk found Jacen in the royal quarters, giving Allana a ride on his shoulder. The tot was giggling up a storm, drool already dripping into Jacen's mess of brown hair. "Rawr, we're powerful Rancors!" Jacen roared, stomping around with deliberate side-to-side swaying motions. Allana continued to laugh as her small body moved with her father's. Jacen paused when he realized that Zekk was in the door way, looking bemused and fighting back laughter.
Jacen was bare-chested, a loose pair of sweats on him. It was evident he had had a hand in feeding Allana breakfast, if the mushed up fruit stains and spilt drink on said pants were any indication. A pile of Allana-sized clothes indicated that it too had breakfast-related damage done to it. At the table where the baby-chair was, scattered bits of cereal surrounded an overturned bowl and a small pool of water surrounded a baby-bottle. A toy box was open with scattered stuffed-animals of various sorts strewn about, and Jacen's Jedi robes were being used to dress a particularly large teddy-bear gifted by some noble hoping to earn favors.
"I see the powerful Rancor left the remains of its morning meal all over the place," Zekk finally laughed. "And then rampaged about the room. Whatever are we going to do?"

"Errr…yeah," Jacen said sheepishly, lifting his daughter off his shoulders and placing her in the play-pen. He then shut off the holo-cam Tenel Ka had set earlier—she had wanted to document the morning after Jacen had unwisely said 'how hard can it be to feed her?'.
"Don't stop on my account," Zekk said, stepping into the room.
Jacen had used the Force to pull a few towels from the bathroom and began to clean up the mess. "Good thing it was you and not Tenel Ka. I don't think she realizes how hazardous it was to leave me with Allana all morning."
"To Allana or to you?"
Using a wet towel to wipe off his hair, Jacen gave Zekk a sidelong look. "Me of course. I have zero experience with babies, and the fact that she's mine scares the…"
"Shirt right off you."
"Very funny."
"Tenel Ka holding court?"
"Until lunch," Jacen nodded his thanks as Zekk helped him tidy up the room. "You need something?"
"Can I talk to you first as Jacen Solo my good friend, then Jacen Solo the Jedi Master on the High Council?"
"Shoot."
"Taryn asked me to marry her last night and I agreed," Zekk got out in a single breath.
"Congratulations."
"Yeah, yeah, I know. You and Tenel Ka's nefarious scheme to get me and Taryn together have succeeded at long last. Pat yourself on the back."
"I fully intend to. So, what's the problem?"
Zekk responded by levitating a knocked-over carton of juice and floating it around the dining table. "I belong to an order of people who do this for a living."
"Ah. Those dastardly flying-juice-cartoners. "
"You do know you're much more amiable when Tenel Ka and Allana are nearby. Makes you a happy person and it shows."
"You're marrying Taryn but afraid the Jedi Order is going to zip you off to the next crisis on the other side of the galaxy?" Jacen summed up, ignoring Zekk's remark.
"Pretty much. I assume with the Killik threat over and Hapes opening its doors to the galaxy, the Jedi Order won't want to spend resources with a Jedi Ambassador to Hapes anymore."

"You're probably right on that," Jacen agreed. "The Killik War really affected the numbers of Jedi we can put into the field. I know of other ambassadors already being recalled and reassigned to more volatile areas. I highly doubt they'd allow someone as capable and powerful as you to languish about in an area of space that's pretty stable."
"That's what I thought," Zekk sighed, shaking his head. "On one hand, I know the galaxy needs my help. On the other, I have a life too, finally have a place that I can call home. The problems in this sector might not be galaxy-threatening, but aren't we Jedi supposed to look out for the little people too?"
"The way I see it," Jacen answered, slowing his actions but continuing to wipe the floor with the rag in his hands. "By returning to the Order, by allowing ourselves to sacrifice our personal peace for the sake of others. That's the true meaning of being a Jedi. We have people we love. We can either love them by being with them and let many people suffer when we could have stopped it, or protect those many people *and* those we love by being in a position to affect policy."
"But what's the point of it all if you have nothing to look forward to at the end?" Zekk asked. "Sure you spend the next few years smiting bad guys and making the galaxy a tiny bit safer, but in the end, those are years you're never going to get back, years you could have spent loving those who love you in turn. That love might be there still, but it won't be the same. Leaving them behind, making the decision to run about the galaxy while they are forced to stay where they are because of their own duty, that's not exactly saying 'I love you'."
"She'll understand though. That same duty that keeps her here forces you to protect those others out among the stars. Just as she protects those on Hapes, tries to make Hapes better, you'll be doing the same but on a larger scale."
"She'll understand that those trillions of others in the galaxy mean more to you than her," Zekk shook his head. "When you love someone with all your heart, you don't just suddenly up and leave. If I stay with the Jedi Order, I won't have any idea when I'd be able to return to Hapes next. Between the missions, the politics, the life and death adventures we Jedi go on, it'll probably be months, if not years before I can be back out here."
"Let's say you stay," Jacen said, beginning to wash the dishes. "Stay, live your life with those you love, have a family. All the while, the darkness in the greater galaxy grows and grows. But you choose to stay on Hapes anyways because it's what makes *you* happy. We're Jedi, Zekk, we can't afford such luxuries when we're often the first and last line of defense this galaxy has. It was why all the orders of the

past actually banned attachments. Apart from the whole dark side thing, if Jedi decided to just settle down, we'd have no way to defend the multitudes that don't have a Jedi defender nearby. We *need* to be out there in the galaxy, not confined to one small corner of it."
"'We need'? What about the needs of those we care for? I understand that we can serve many more people jetting about the galaxy, but what about serving those closest to us. Being a Jedi is more than selflessly throwing our lives away for the greater good. It's finding that good in life and trying to preserve it the best we can. As much as she'd probably love to come away with me and jet across the galaxy fighting crime, Hapes is her home, the place she feels most strongly about. And don't people who feel strongly about one location or people, or person, fight the hardest? How can I go to distant planets, systems I'll probably never visit again in my life time, and expect to defend and protect it with the same emotions I would defending her, defending Hapes? A Jedi's strength comes from their love of life, and she's become a very big part of my life."
"I can only tell you what the Jedi Council would say," Jacen said wearily. "They'd more than likely ask you to return to active duty, to go where you'll be needed most. Yes, you're married now, but even Jedi Masters can't spend time with their other. Master Durron's wife saw more of him during our campaign against the Killiks than over the last couple of years, and they have three kids together. We can't always get what we want, Zekk. If you're a Jedi, you have to maintain the responsibility expected of us. If that means leaving our families behind to serve the greater good, then so be it."
Zekk, who had been dangling a stuffed Nexu over the edge of the play-pen, let Allana take it from him as he glanced back towards Jacen. "And if I leave the Jedi Order?"
"Zekk," Jacen wiped off his hands on a dish towel and sat on one of the chairs at the dining table. "You can do whatever you want. If you think the galaxy will be better served with you quitting the Order, go ahead. A Jedi can't afford to be selfish, can't afford to place their own needs and wants over that of an entire galaxy. So if you don't think you can handle that responsibility any more, go ahead and leave the Order. I'm sure many people would understand."
Zekk nodded silently. Watching as the stuffed Nexu's head became Allana's latest chew-toy. Organizing his thoughts, he looked over to Jacen again. "What will you be doing? I know you have no plans to stay on Hapes. But are you at least going to visit?"

Jacen, his gaze locked on the tiny red curls atop his daughter's head, smiled sadly as he shook his head. "It makes things a lot less complicated for both Tenel Ka and I if I don't."
"Your daughter needs a father," Zekk protested mildly. "I grew up without parents, and let me tell you, Peckham was a life-saver. I'd have been proud to call him dad."
Jacen emitted a soft laugh, shaking his head. "You just don't understand, Zekk. I'm a Solo, a Jedi Master, a member of the High Council. Tenel Ka's a Queen Mother for billions. Every decision we make, every side we take, it has the potential to ruin or make lives. If I stayed here, I'd be embroiled in Hapan politics, make Tenel Ka and Allana an even bigger target. If I stayed here, I wouldn't be able to use the Solo name to help protect Hapes from outside enemies. What happens when the next Killiks or Vong, or whatever, decides to invade? On the High Council I can help make the policy needed to keep the galaxy spinning, to make sure that Hapes enjoys the peace it's currently enjoying for a very long time. Yes Tenel Ka and Allana are important to me. I love them, and because of that, I have to leave them."
"I'm sorry," Zekk said gently.
"Don't be," Jacen shook his head. "The Force wanted it this way for a reason. Besides, whenever I have visions of Allana, she's always surrounded by friends and family. She'll probably be so loved, she won't even need me."
"She'll always need her dad," Zekk shook his head.
"She's stronger than Tenel Ka and I," Jacen's lopsided smile was melancholy. "She'll be just fine."
"I hope you're right."
"I am too," Jacen sighed. He then forced a smile onto his face. "So, when's the wedding?"
"You know Taryn," Zekk had to laugh. "She wanted it quick and out of the way. We're doing it twice actually, a small Hapan wedding and a Jedi one."
"A Jedi one?" Jacen's eyebrows rose.
"She wanted to be sure we were married in the eyes of the Force too," Zekk laughed, nodding. "They're scheduled for this weekend, at the old Zel family estate."
"This weekend is Allana's birthday," Jacen noted.
"Great, you can bring her along. It's going to be a small audience only. She didn't want those extravagant things the nobles throw, you know, the multi-million credit bashes."
"We'll be there, definitely," Jacen nodded. "Zekk."

"Yeah?"
"If you do decide to stay on Hapes, decide to leave the Order…" Jacen trailed off, his gaze still focused on Allana.
"I'll look after them both," Zekk said solemnly. "Promise."
"Thank you," Jacen breathed out, looking away and out the balcony window. "Just because the Force wants it a certain way, doesn't mean I have to be happy with it. But this is the way it has to be, the way to keep the darkness at bay and to ensure that Allana grows up to have that future I dream she has."
0-o-V-o-0
News of a member of the royal family getting married quickly circulated through the nobility, and the commoners, and the Jedi Order. It was an instant hit among the local HoloNet, which was grateful to provide coverage about something that wasn't a funeral, grieving family, or construction project. It was the talk of the town among the commoners, who delighted in the fact that Taryn Zel of Her Majesty's Royal House, was actually marrying someone with a non-existent pedigree. The fact that a royal was marrying for love, to someone who had been born and raised in the streets, gave hope to the people that the times were indeed changing. Of course, the reverse was also true, with many noble families calling it the 'scandal of the millennium'. A member of the royal house completely eschewing decorum and tradition, not to mention politics, on a level that even Teneniel hadn't dared, was unheard of. There were even calls from some of the more conservative groups for Tenel Ka to forbid the marriage or strip Taryn of her title.
But the happy couple wasn't about to let any of that get to them. They were beyond giddy, with Taryn's delight becoming infectious to the rest of her squad. Said squad did their best to insulate her from the negative media and political views, giving death glares to anyone who dared try and spoil the genuine joy she radiated.
Zekk, of course, was also getting congratulations from his friends across the Order as news made it out of the Transitory Mists. A couple days before the wedding, both he and Taryn were sitting in the Zel-family's dining room, laughing as the holo-image of Jaina Solo recounted a memory from their younger days.
"Okay, so both you and Jacen…"
"*And Anakin, and Lowie, and Tesar, and Tekli…"*
"I get the point, all of you knew I was going to end up with Taryn," Zekk couldn't help but laugh. "Can someone explain why the Force made me take this long to realize it?"

"*The Force has a sense of humor and wanted to draw out your relationship as long as possible so we could all make bets, jokes, and enjoy your floundering,"* Jaina guessed, laughing in turn.
"Ah, yes, the Force secretly likes epic space soap-operas," Zekk deadpanned.
Taryn giggled. "Hey, it worked out in the end. He'll officially be Zekk Zel very, very soon."
"*I still can't believe the two of you are really getting married,*" Jaina Solo was grinning from ear to ear.
"Yeah," Zekk chuckled. "Me too."
"*Of course, you had to wait until I'm on the other side of the galaxy and tied up in all sorts of Imperial business, right? Geez, first Imperial stuff makes me miss Allana's birth and now I have to miss out on your wedding too?"*
"Taryn and I thought about having it later, but we weren't sure what the galaxy would have in store for us so…"
"*You don't need to give me any excuses, Zekk. I understand*," Jaina said, her eyes soft. "*I'm glad you've finally found someone you can spend your life with.*"
"Thanks, I am too," Zekk laughed, his arms wrapped around a smiling Taryn. "Any sign that your boyfriend is going to take things to the next level too?"
Jaina laughed wryly. "*Neither of us are ready for that step. We still have so much to do out here. Jagged's literally fighting for his life and office every day, trying to duck the political maneuvers the Moffs are pulling. I'm trying to make sure the Force-sensitives over here have a balanced training so they don't become the next generation of Sith Lords and Ladies.*"
"You make Hapan politics sound so petty and small in comparison," Taryn commented. "All we care about is what happens in the cluster. Those Imperials seem to want to take over the entire galaxy."
"*Tell me about it*," Jaina shook her head in amusement. "*Does this mean that you've convinced Zekk to stay on Hapes?*"
"As if he needed any convincing," Taryn squeezed his hands.
Jaina tilted her head slightly. "*The Jedi Order is okay with that*?"
Zekk released a slow breath. "You're probably the first person outside of Trista and Taryn I'm telling. But I've decided to leave the Jedi Order."
"*Really*?"
"Yeah," Zekk nodded, his voice thick. He felt Taryn gently caress the arms he had wrapped around her. "It's been my life for so long, made me who I am. But I think…I think the life I'm trading it for is more than

worth it. Actually, I *know* it's worth it. I can't keep fighting for abstract ideals and ancient platitudes forever."
"*The Jedi Order is definitely going to be poorer without you*," Jaina said, her expression tender.
"You're okay with it?"
"*You're talking to the girl who's shacked up with an Imperial Moff and wearing Imperial-black Jedi robes*. *Turi was right though, they are very slimming,*" Jaina grinned. She leaned back into the high-backed chair, head pillowed in her hands, and spun around with the chair once. "*I'm a firm believer in following one's heart.*"
"Jacen seems to think the opposite. He's leaving Hapes for Denon after Allana's first birthday. Says he can do more for his family over there than on Hapes."
"*That does sound like him*," Jaina sighed, shaking her head. "*I'm with you on this one Zekk. You can still do your duty as a Jedi, serve the galaxy, **and** be with the people you love. Both sides have to make sacrifices, but it's doable. Even if you're on Hapes, you'll be keeping the light side strong in that pocket of the galaxy."*
"I understand your sacrifice," Zekk said. "You've practically marooned yourself in that far corner of the galaxy away from your family, friends, and other Jedi. What'd Jagged give up?"
"*We're together out here, but we're also not,*" Jaina explained after a moment. "*When he was Assistant Syndic, I couldn't marry him, have any sort of family or out-right relationship with him because of politics. We could be near each other, share a few hours at a time together, but ultimately we were tied to our duties. Even now as a Moff, because his position is so tenuous, nothing is certain for either of us. We've probably spent all of a day or two together since you guys left, and most of that time was discussing strategy and politics. Because of his position, his responsibilities, he **has** to place me at a lower priority to keep the both of us alive. He doesn't like it one bit, but we both know duty, understand the responsibility we have to those who look to us for direction. Someday, maybe, we'll be able to marry, spend time together without creating some political firestorm. But that's not going to happen any time soon."*
"You said both sides have to give some. Do you think…" Taryn started, taking a breath to organize her thoughts. "Do you think I should have accepted a position in one of the GA's commando units? I know they're recruiting heavily to replace the people they lost during the war. If I was accepted into one of those squads, then Zekk could stay in the Order. I feel as if I'm asking Zekk to step away from the only family

he's ever known, and I *know* he'd never ask that of me. But if I was a GA commando…"
"*You'd have even less time with Zekk and no guarantee of even meeting up even during leave times,*" Jaina said, shaking her head. "*You'd also be serving an institution you don't truly believe in. I think that's kind of why Zekk's willing to step away from the Order. He's outgrown it.*"
"I wouldn't put it that way, but…well…maybe I would," Zekk said with a sheepish laugh. "It gave me structure, a path to walk and guides to show me how to walk that path."
"*And now it's time for you to forge your own path*," Jaina said, her expression gentle.
"With Taryn," Zekk confirmed, giving Taryn a quick kiss on her cheek.
"*I'm truly happy for you, Zekk.*" Jaina grinned a lopsided Solo-style grin. "*Who knew all those years ago during the Vong War that you'd meet your future wife in the bed-chambers of the Queen Mother*?"
"She did," Zekk said dryly. She rolled her eyes and playfully slapped his arm. "What? Didn't you tell me you Hapan women always get what you want if you have your heart set on it?"
"You remember!" Taryn beamed.
"Yeah, I guess I do." Zekk was given a quick kiss by his future wife.
"*Stay well, you two, and watch each other's backs*," Jaina laughed.
"Always," Taryn confirmed.
"Definitely," Zekk nodded.
"*Good luck you two, may the Force be with you, both.*"

0-o-VI-o-0

The day could not have been more perfect for a wedding. The sun was shining, but a breeze kept the temperature down. Sky a deep blue with wisps of clouds floating by. The wild garden around the Zel ancestral home lent its scent of wildflowers and earthy herbs to the festivities, while the copse of trees provided the shade. Despite it being a royal wedding, only a few dozen people were present.
Crown Prince Isolder and Trista were in Hapan finery, while the noble-household members of Alpha Squad were similarly bedecked in the richest clothes Hapes could fine. The non-noble members were in their dress uniforms, but looked at ease with the rest of the Hapan delegation—a group of school-age children from the many orphanages Zekk had been helping in the last month. Most of the children had grown up under the fear of the Yuuzhan Vong or Killiks and were very withdrawn because of it. Zekk wanted to reach out to these hand-picked Hapan kids to show them that life was not always dark and scary and full of death. Many nobles had been relatively miffed that a

bunch of poor children got to attend the exclusive wedding over they, but were slightly placated when they realized that no other noble outside Taryn's squad had been invited either. And it was hard to be gloomy or sad in the almost festive atmosphere of the Zel estate's backyard.

In their best Jedi robes and grinning along with the rest of the crowd were the Skywalker family, Tesar, and Tekli. Jacen was closer to the bride and groom, Allana in a carry-pouch attached to his chest. The serenity and joy permeating the air was infectious, with genuine laughter and wide smiles everywhere.

Tenel Ka was at the end of a pebbled walkway in full Queen Mother regalia, her gray eyes warm and full of happiness as she stood by Zekk and Taryn. In a low, almost teasing voice, she raised an eyebrow to her cousin. "Are you certain you wish to do this?"

"Yes, *Chume*," Taryn chuckled. From the warm sunlight, Taryn seemed like she was glowing in her dazzling silvery wedding dress.

"And you, my friend?" Tenel Ka looked to Zekk.

"Definitely," Zekk smiled back, dressed in his finest Jedi robes.

Tenel Ka turned her attention to the gathered crowd. "My friends, we are here today to celebrate the marriage of my cousin, Lady Taryn Zel of House Zel, to one of my dearest friends, Jedi Knight Zekk. This will be the first of two ceremonies. I will be conducting the rest of this ceremony in Hapan, in the tradition of our mothers' mothers to formally bind them in the eyes of Hapan law. Then, Grandmaster Skywalker will call upon the Force to bless and confirm the union of these two amazing people."

Zekk couldn't help but feel his heart pound loudly in his chest as he held both of Taryn's hands in his own. His own green gaze focused solely on the sparkling gray of the red-haired woman in front of him. Almost distantly, he heard Tenel Ka recite the Hapan marriage rites in an older dialect of the Hapan native tongue. He knew what to expect, knew that the ancient words she was speaking were his vows to uphold. Most of the vows were a bit archaic in nature, having remained the same for thousands of years: a list of things he now could and could not do without Taryn's permission, a promise that at least one child would be a daughter, to uphold the House he was marrying into, and similar conditions. Face shielded from the view of the audience by the hood of her gown, Taryn stuck out her tongue at the conditions, and he did his very best not to burst out laughing.

Then Tenel Ka moved on to Taryn's half of the deal, again the vows were remnants of the Hapan culture of three millennia earlier. Taryn was to ensure that he was well cared for, that he raise any sons they

did have to be worthy of a Hapan woman, that she trust him to speak on her behalf if she is not present and so on. Unable to physically stick his tongue out at her, Zekk sent his wife a mental image, and saw the corners of her lips rise into a smirk. But it wasn't like either of them could do anything about it. Tradition was tradition, even if it didn't make sense at times.

"Do you, Taryn Zel, accept Zekk to be your husband, your partner in life and equal in all aspects of your household?" Tenel Ka said in Basic, a knowing glint in her eyes as she deliberately reworded the ending of the Hapan rite. After all, no ancient Hapan ritual would ever let the man be equal in such a union. Sometimes, though, it was okay for tradition to change…sometimes.

"I do," Taryn nodded, grinning at her cousin.

"And Zekk, do you promise to keep my cousin happy, to honor her and support her, and to be there for her for as long as the Force allows?"

"I do," Zekk breathed.

"In the eyes of Hapan law, by my word as Queen Mother, you are now husband and wife. Do I really need to give you permission to kiss one and other?" Tenel Ka said with an arched eyebrow.

Zekk and Taryn grinned and promptly moved into each other's arms, sharing a brief but passionate kiss to the cheers of their audience.

"Now then," Tenel Ka spoke, gesturing to Luke Skywalker. "To officiate the second ceremony, might I present to the guests here, Grandmaster Luke Skywalker of the New Jedi Order."

"Thank you, *Chume*," Luke looked years younger in the Hapan sunlight as he stepped up onto the dais. "Zekk, Lady Zel."

Zekk and Taryn bowed respectfully. Luke had accepted Zekk's decision to leave the Order, fully understanding the reasoning and promising that he would always have a place in the Order should he decide to return. That had taken a great deal of weight of the two, and made the day all the more special.

Luke returned the bow, then addressed the crowd. "As some of you may know, there is no 'ancient' Jedi marriage tradition, as the Orders before this one all believed marriage to be harmful. But from firsthand experience, I can tell you that it is the furthest thing from the truth. There is no greater joy in life than to start a family with someone you love. To wake up every day knowing that whatever the day throws at you, you'll have someone at your side ready to back you up every step of the way. I've known Zekk for many years now, and can honestly say that I am proud of the person he's become, happy for the path in life he has just started on."

"Thank you," Zekk whispered out.

"From the ancient traditions of Hapes, to the new traditions we are just starting. If the two of you could please kneel before one and other," Luke gestured for Taryn and Zekk to kneel where they were.
They did, resting on the backs of their legs.
"Close your eyes," Luke instructed. "Though you might not be a Jedi, Lady Zel, the Force flows through all living things, big and small. Breathe out slowly, and back in. Focus on the warmth from the sun, the crisp breeze as it blows through this garden. Hear the birds sing, the leaves rustle. The scent of the plants, of the soil beneath you. Remember it, engrave it into your mind. Your eyes are closed, yet you know without a doubt that the one you love sits right in front of you. The Force has brought you together against all odds, brought you to this very moment. Focus on the one you love, breathe in, breathe out."
Zekk and Taryn did as told, their senses seemingly heightened as the Force swirled around the two of them.
Open your eyes.
Both Taryn and Zekk did as told, finding themselves alone in an ethereal version of the garden they had been in. White lights fluttered all around, the plants almost silvery in nature. Behind them, the Zel family home was in shades of white and gray, glimmering brightly in the realm they were in. The world seemed to return to normal colors, but this time they could see older versions of themselves in the house. The sound of children laughing pealed out from the open windows. Zekk was teaching two young girls how to bake while Taryn and a young boy stole samples of what was being made.
The scene faded back to white, then to color again.
The children were older, their own images now sporting hints of gray in their hair. It was a family meal, animated conversation filtering from the house. Both daughters wore the outfit of the *Chume'doro,* the boy —now a young man—wearing a SigIntel uniform. On the lap of one of the daughters was a baby, who gurgled a bit as the daughter handed her off to the older version of Taryn. The family resemblance was clear, and as the group shared a smile, feelings of inviting warmth and youthful energy filled the ancient house of the Zel family.
The house faded to white one last time, and when it returned to normal color, Taryn and Zekk could see themselves again. This time, their older versions had wrinkled faces, hair now completely gray. Taryn walked with a noticeable limp, Zekk looking tired. They sat down onto a swinging bench between two trees in the garden, Taryn leaning into Zekk, eyes closing. He held her tenderly, his own eyes fluttering close as sleep claimed them. Contentment, completion.

One of many possible futures, Luke's voice echoed gently. *The Force has brought you together, has ensured that you have reached this day. The future now, is up to you.*
"Open your eyes and stand," Luke's voice said almost hypnotically. Taryn and Zekk did, tears of happiness escaping. Realizing that barely a few seconds had passed, they again bowed their heads to Luke, who smiled kindly in turn. A swirling breeze rippled through the garden, a sense of harmony and peacefulness coursing through everyone present.
"In the eyes of the Force, you are one," Luke said softly. "Congratulations, the two of you, and may you live long, happy lives."
The audience, which had been absolutely quiet throughout the ceremony, cheered as one, more than a few wet eyes being hastily wiped at. Unlike the Hapan ceremony, both Zerkk and Taryn simply hugged, their hearts beating rapidly as they recalled every detail of that possible future.
"I love you," Zekk whispered softly.
"I love you too," Taryn murmured. "We're going to do whatever we have to do to get that future, right?"
"Definitely," Zekk confirmed.
The two parted, holding hands and smiling at their audience.
As the crowd followed Taryn and Zekk back down the aisle towards the tables laden with food, the sun shone brightly and all was well in the ancestral household of the family Zel.

0-o-VII-o-0

Jacen Solo knew that his best friend and their daughter were in good hands, knew that despite the distance, their relationship would endure. He was leaving Hapes, not sure when he'd be able to return. Months, years, decades? It was all up in the air. Even then, he could not help but keep his face emotionless as he stood on one of the Fountain Palace's landing pads in front of the shuttle that was to take him away. He had said his goodbyes the previous night, had warded his heart for this very moment. The minute he had stepped out of the threshold of the palace, he had ceased to be Jacen Solo, lover of Tenel Ka and father of Allana and had changed into Jedi Master Jacen Solo, with the weight of the galaxy on his shoulders.
Vergere had been right all along. Being forced to choose between Tenel Ka and the galaxy, between Allana and the galaxy, and he had chosen the galaxy. He had chosen to master his emotions, to prevent them from making rash decisions for him. He could not afford to love, to spend time with Tenel Ka and Allana, not with the state the galaxy was currently in. And the only way he could help fix the galaxy was not

tucked away in an isolationist kingdom—pretending the galaxy was spinning just fine—but on Denon, Coruscant, or wherever else he was needed. As it was, he had spent one month on Hapes, and a part of him was already chastising the rest of him for it being a month too long.

Just because he had decided to take a break from the fighting, didn't mean that the problems in the Senate, with the Jedi Order, had taken a break as well. The sleek, black, medical mask that covered the bottom quarter of the right side of his face—worn because the Killik acid had eaten away his cheek and parts of his jaw bone and throat—was a stark reminder of what could happen if he let his guard down. Though he had been wearing it since the battle with Welk, it was only now that he felt its presence on his face. It was almost as if his time with his family had made him forget about it entirely, forget about the burdens, about the many scars visible and intangible he had picked up over his relatively young life.

But now, on the landing platform, about to depart the comforts and luxuries of Hapes, about to separate from his family, everything he had blocked out was rushing back. Duty, responsibility, pain, resolve, molded his mind so that the love he felt for his family was seen in a different light. He was leaving them to ensure that not just them, but as many people as possible, could have bright happy futures.

"Let me know if some other extra-galactic alien decides to make Hapes their home," Jacen said with a hint of a smile, mentally noting the slight mechanical buzz his mask gave his voice. Why he hadn't realized it before had never crossed his mind. "I'm sure I owe you a fleet or two by now."

"Not to mention a new palace," Tenel Ka said with an arched eyebrow. "You still owe the Royal Family for all the repairs your sortie with Lomi caused."

"Only half," Jacen bargained. "She was the other party involved in the fight."

"I'm working off my debt to society," Lomi's robotic voice said sarcastically, from the small crowd of gathered Hapan dignitaries, officials, and friends. "I'm a Hapan general you know."

"And the uniform suits you," Jacen said lightly. "Those bright Hapan purples and reds are a lot better than those browns and blacks you used to wear."

"I think your girlfriend had me wear these colors so she could pick me out in a crowd," Lomi grumbled, ignoring the glares from the Hapan nobles about her disrespectful reference to their ruler.

"Don't worry, Jacen," Zekk chuckled. "I'll work off your debt to the Royal Family for you. It's what friends are for, right?"
"Yeah," Jacen smirked. "Thanks. Still sure about staying on Hapes? The galaxy could really use your help you know."
"I'm sure," Zekk nodded. "I can do my part by helping Tenel Ka out over here."
"And we'll be free babysitters for the *chume'da*," Taryn added.
Jacen offered Zekk and Taryn a two-fingered salute. "Take care you two."
"You too, Jacen," Zekk nodded.
Jacen looked back to Allana, being held in Tenel Ka's arms and looking wide-eyed at the people around her. Slowly, he planted a tender kiss atop her head, letting his hand slowly caress the smooth skin of her face. "And you, Allana…Keep on growing and become as strong as your mom. Even if I'm not here for you physically, I'll always be a comm-call away."
Allana looked at her father with wide eyes before making a couple of happy baby sounds and burrowing herself back against her mother.
"We will be well, Jacen," Tenel Ka said, her voice barely a whisper. "Promise."
"Thank you," Jacen replied. He took a step back from his family, his smile now forced as he tilted his head slightly at everyone else. "Good luck, and may the Force be with you all."
He turned without waiting for a response and, after taking a deep breath, continued on, up the shuttle ramp. There was no pilot, he had eschewed one in favor of personally directing the vessel back to his awaiting ship. In the pilot's seat, looking out the viewport as he started up the ship, Jacen's eyes fluttered close for several long moments. Through the Force he broadcast his emotions to Allana and Tenel Ka, emotions he wouldn't be able to communicate to them for a very long time once he was on Denon. *This, this is what it was meant to be a Jedi*, he thought, opening up his eyes. *To give up everyone you love for the greater good, for the many others who need you.*
The shuttle lifted off the landing pad, the many faces that had come to see him off soon replaced by the spires of the Fountain Palace, then by the white clouds that covered the sky. Soon Hapes itself was but a rotating orb beneath him as the vast field of stars took its place in the viewport. And as he focused on bringing his shuttle into the landing bay of the carrier assigned to pick him up, he couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. After all, he was a Jedi Master, and his place was among the stars.
0-o-Chapter End-o-0

Corellia
0-o-I-o-0
It was a somber moment in Coronet City. It was an entire planet in mourning. So many Corellian's had answered Anakin's call to arms. So many had made the Unknown Regions their final resting place. The material loss was traumatic for the Corellians as well. Only a couple of years ago they had been a major power broker, fighting a proxy-war with the Imperial Remnant over the Tion Hegemony. They had had many systems looking to them for security, for resources, for the peace-of-mind that Denon hadn't been able to give those systems. But the dual losses in Hapes and in the Utegetu Nebula had crippled Corellia's militaristic ambitions. Unlike Hapes, which had the resources of sixty-three systems to draw upon, Corellia manly relied on the five worlds within its own system, and trade with many others. This meant no miracle rebuilding of the hundreds of vessels lost in the Swarm War. No sudden fountain of wealth enabling a quick recovery. Not when the loss of those fleet groups meant that Corellia had to pull its ships back from other systems, reducing the security of the trading routes.
Amid the grieving, there was naturally an instinct to look for answers. Why did so many Corellians die? Why did Corellia involve itself in galactic affairs in the first place? Why was the Empire thriving, Bakura thriving, when the Corellian economy was going in the completely opposite direction?
The answer, and the blame, cast by many lay in the occupants of a particular building in downtown Coronet; a building with a giant green gem on top. Not helping matters any was the attitude of many of the surviving Corellian veterans.
"The Jedi, Green or not, don't deserve the special status we've given them. It was the Jedi who led our fleets to Hapes and got Admiral Karathas killed. It was the Jedi who led our brave men and women out to battle the space bugs and got them massacred. Our own legendary General Wedge Antilles, hero of the rebellion is in a coma thanks to the 'helpful' actions of the Jedi."
"Interesting you should mention General Antilles. With us in the studio right now is his eldest daughter, First Lieutenant Syal Antilles of the renown VibroSword squadron. Thank you for joining us, lieutenant."
"Thank you."
"Can you share with us your reason for being on this show?"
"Someone has to open the eyes of the general public. The Jedi aren't the magical do-gooders who can do no wrong. They aren't saints, good spirits, or the bright side of whatever religion you believe in. They're

simply mortal like us. Do we give our politicians giant skyscrapers for getting our armed forces decimated? Do we give them tax breaks or involve them in policy if they truly don't care about the people of Corellia? The Jedi are ordinary people. Flawed, corrupt in some cases, and otherwise very fallible. In the Swarm War, I guess that's what you media people are calling it right?"
"More or less, we got the name from the Office of the Chief of State of the Galactic Alliance."
"Phew, I knew we Corellians were more inventive than that."
"Ha ha, you were saying, lieutenant?"
"Right, I served with the Jedi during the Swarm War. Met a few of them. I was surprised that most of the ones leading the fight were barely older than I am. These twenty-something year old Jedi were in charge of the millions of lives they dragged out to the Unknown Regions with them. Correct me if I'm wrong, but the youngest general, admiral, what have you in the CDF is fifty-ish years old. Had earned his or her way up the ranks and had plenty of experience in multiple levels of war. From the frontlines to the rear echelon, they knew what we grunts and flyboys and girls were getting into because they were us once. These Jedi. They come in with their fancy hand-waving, their sage advice, and less tactical education than a non-com. And we put them in charge of the military forces that are supposed to protect us from the evils out there? That just doesn't seem..."
The holo flicked off.
"Great interview, sis. Now tell us how you really feel about the Jedi," a wan-looking Myri said, putting the remote down. Her eyes were Joiner-black, though clearing gradually thanks to the constant stream of drugs being pumped into her.
"If I did, they'd have to censor me," Syal said softly. "How do you feel"
Myri winced, accepting the cup of water her sister held for her. "Like our head was split open by a Gamorrean axe. We can no longer hear the starsong if that's what you're asking."
"I think I'll feel better when you stop using plural pronouns to talk about yourself," Syal sighed.
"Cheer up sis, we are alive at least."
"Probably the only reason why I didn't go all out during the interview," Syal answered back. Smoothing her sister's pillow.
"Is dad…?"
"Still out. Jedi Master Corran Horn is personally overseeing his healing."
"Oh, good." Myri's eyes fluttered slightly, and her good nature evaporated slightly. "Still can't believe the others are all gone."

The others were the members of Phantom squad, the Corellian crack intel team that had embedded itself in the Killik fleet to provide real-time intel to the rest of the defenders. They were all dead, or Joined and had retreated into the distant Unknown Regions with the surviving Killik forces.
Syal sent a silent thanks to whatever cosmic force was watching over them that Myri had had the sense to lock herself in a stasis pod the moment she realized she was becoming a Joiner. Said pod had survived the destruction of the ship it had been on and had been recovered by salvage teams.
"At least you made it back," Syal whispered. "It'd have killed mom and dad if they had lost you."
"They know the risks we take," Myri answered back. "They were in our shoes once."
"I don't think mom ever had to infiltrate an army of mind-controlling bugs bent on destroying the galaxy," Syal said dryly. "Any way, Prime Minister Denjax Teppler is going to stop by later today, wants to give you a medal."
"He doesn't mind that we talk in plural pronouns?" Myri asked with a smile and arched eyebrow.
"I don't think anyone thought to update him on that," Syal smirked back.
"Play the part of grievously traumatized and mute veteran," Myri nodded in turn. "Check."
"Or challenge yourself to not use any pronouns at all when you talk," Syal said. "You know, like one of those improv-games mom had us play when we were kids."
Myri's smile faltered for a moment, then she recovered, smiling but not too convincingly. "Right, those improv-games."
"Myri?"
The younger Antilles looked out the window of her hospital room. Several long minutes passed, Syal clenching a fist helplessly as a single tear formed in her younger sister's eyes. Just when Syal was about to say something, Myri beat her to it. "Our memories, they are jumbled, some missing. We do not remember those games."
"Myri…"
Myri turned back to her older sister, a pained smile on her face. "We can remember every single day of our spec-ops training, every detail, right down to that stain that was on Kaarz-Dance's bright blue shirt when we met him. We can remember the food we ate, what it tastes like, with perfect clarity." Myri made a face. "Emergency ration bars

still tastes pretty bad, even the memory of them. We can remember our name, who we were before the Joining, our likes and dislikes…"
"But?" Syal asked gently.
Myri smiled tearfully, shaking her head. "We cannot remember anything of our childhood. We cannot remember the games we probably played as sisters, cannot remember if we had a favorite toy or HoloNet show. Everything else, preserved by the Joining in perfect detail, but what made us truly us is completely gone."
"The docs said that some Joiners torn from the Killiks don't recall much of their past life," Syal said hoarsely, clearly remembering the conversation she had had with Myri's doctors. "It's a defense-mechanism of sorts, erasing the past so that the only family the Joiner would have and know is the hive; making the Joiner's desire to return all the stronger."
Myri just nodded, curling up into a fetal position on the bed and pulled one of the pillows to her chest. "What were we like, as a child, sister? Tell us of the games you mentioned, of the stories mom and dad must have told us, of the things we did when we were younger."
Syal swallowed heavily, her own eyes tearing up as she abortively reached out to comfort her sister, then placed her hand back into her lap. "Well, you weren't that much different than you are now. Determined, always able to get what you want done, no matter how hard."
"Like surviving the Joining and giant exploding Killik fleet and making it back to a hospital on Corellia," Myri inputted.
Syal emitted a weak laugh, nodding. Her grip on her chair's armrests was white-knuckled. "Yeah, but on a smaller scale. We grew up on the *Errant Venture*, traveled around with Jedi-in-training while mom and dad saved the galaxy from one thing or another. Because we were kids, we were forbidden from accessing certain decks, but you were curious about what they looked like. We spent four hours crawling through the ventilation shafts without a clue of where we were going, and then we finally dropped out onto the bridge somehow. It's impossible to forget the look on Captain Terrik's face…" Syal trailed off, doing her best to stay smiling.
"We can imagine," Myri encouraged gently.
"You'll get better," Syal shook her head. "The memory thing is probably only temporary. If not, we can always get Jedi Master Horn over her to take a look at it too. There's also some specialized healers in Coron…"
"Syal," Myri reached out and placed a hand over her sister's. "We are still alive. We are hoping we will stay this way for a very long time."
Sniffling, Syal looked at her sister's peaceful expression. "Me too."

"Then please, continue your stories. We wish to be Myri Antilles, not AntillesMueum, and every memory you give back to us will make that possible."
Wiping at her eyes, Syal took a calming breath and squeezed her little sister's hand. "Okay, how about the time…"
0-o-II-o-0
The Antilles family home was a lot emptier than usual, felt colder too, Syal surmised as she stared upwards, head pillowed in the palms of her hands. She was on her bed in her teenage-years' third floor room, the skylight giving her unrestricted view of the starry sky above. Her mother was still over at the Corellian Jedi Praxeum, doing who knows what in addition to looking after Wedge. Her sister was once again sedated, the doctors hoping that her unconscious state would allow her mind to heal.
This left her all by her lonesome in a house that had once been filled with cheer and fond memories.
The doorbell chimed.
Frowning, Syal rolled out of bed and made her way downstairs. It wasn't that the hour was late, but Syal couldn't think of anyone who'd want to visit.
She checked the security monitor, her eyebrows shooting up at the sight of the Prime Minister and a pair of his bodyguards. She walked to the door, slightly confused. She had seen Denjax Teppler at the hospital earlier in the day when he had stopped by for a photo-op with her sister. Wondering what else was in store, she opened the door and saluted.
"Prime Minister."
"At ease, lieutenant," Denjax's photogenic face crinkled in a friendly manner as he gestured for her to relax.
Syal dropped the salute. "Sir?"
"You are perhaps wondering why I'm here?"
"Yes, sir." Syal said haltingly, then remembering her manners. "Please, come in. I'm sorry I don't have any food or drinks ready, I wasn't expecting…"
"Relax, lieutenant. May I call you Syal?"
"Errr…yes, sir."
"Great, and you can call me Denjax. I'm still not used to being Prime minister even though it's almost been half a year now."
"Yes, sir," Syal answered robotically, still somewhat shocked that the leader of the Five Worlds was now in her family's dining room.
"As you know, the Corellian Defense Force has taken a major hit in terms of both ships and manpower," Denjaax began, taking a seat and

folding his hands together. "With the additional loss of several of our trading partners, the various number crunchers tell me it'll take at least another decade to recover that lost strength. Never mind the hit to morale, but this severely jeopardizes Corellia's ability to respond to future threats."
Syal nodded, wondering where he was going with this. Had it been earlier in the day, her mind might have made the jump. But with all the emotional events throughout, she just waited for him to spell it out for her.
"I understand that you have finished your obligated tour of duty for the Galactic Alliance," Denjax said. "It would be Corellia's great honor that, instead of re-upping with the GA, you join the CDF instead."
"What?" Syal blinked.
"You'll be able to keep whatever rank you end up as at the end of your service to GA Starfighter Command, and will be given your own fighter squadron. Between you and me, you have more than enough experience to be promoted to captain, but procedures and the like," Denjax chuckled. "You've probably seen more action than most of the CDF pilots anyway, so a promotion shouldn't be long in the running. And the greatest bonus is that you'll be stationed in-system, enabling you to check on your sister and father during your down-time."
Syal blinked again, absorbing what Denjax was saying. "You want me to be in the Corellian Defense Force? As a pilot?"
"Well, you and most of the other Corellians currently in the GA armed forces," Denjax said. "As I said earlier, the loss of two fleets in this conflict was crippling, and we can't exactly be loaning our soldiers out to the greater galaxy when we're barely holding things together here. Tomorrow, I'm making a formal request for all serving Corellians to return. Not sure the good that would do, but I thought I'd show you the respect your family deserves by asking you in person."
"I…thank you," Syal murmured.
"You can, of course take your time. I don't really need an answer any time soo…"
"I'll do it," Syal cut him off, her mind made. Despite the fact that her family had strong ties to the Galactic Alliance, they were ties she didn't want anything to do with any more.
"You will?"
"The CDF, its command structure is independent of the Corellian Jedi, right?"
"The Green Jedi do assist on some missions, but yes, they do not have operational control."

"You've probably seen the interviews I gave on the Holo," Syal said. "The Galactic Alliance Navy is too reliant on the Jedi to get things done, and both the crews on the capital ships and the starfighter pilots have paid the price for it. The Chief of State might be heralding a Peace of a Millennium, but too many people died for it."
"Not that I'm saying that your reasoning is a good thing, but the CDF will definitely be stronger for your presence. In fact, I think you'll appreciate the commanding officer I plan to have you serve under."
"Sir?"
"Admiral Kadra Bres-Durron has also agreed to leave the Galactic Alliance and return to her homeworld."
"How'd you manage to convince her to do that?"
"Didn't take much. From what I gather, she was rather tired of the long Outer Rim deployments with minimal support. Jumped at a chance to be only a few hours away from the rest of her family."
"I guess dad was right when he said that Corellians will always be Corellians no matter where in the galaxy they are."
"I'll let you settle things with your superiors in GA Starfighter Command," Denjax rose. "And then I'll be sure to personally welcome you into the Corellian Defense Force."
"Thank you, sir."
"No, thank you. The things you have done, the things everyone has seen you do, they are truly befitting of the legacy we Corellians leave in the galaxy. Have a good evening, Lieutenant Antilles."
Syal showed the Prime Minister to the door, giving him one last salute as he stepped into his awaiting speeder. She watched the speeder head down the winding road, its lights cutting the path before it. When the headlights were mere pinpricks, she allowed herself to relax, leaning against the doorframe and smiling in relief. She had been so conflicted about returning to active-duty. Hadn't wanted to leave her mom with both Myri and Wedge in the states they were in. She knew that her mom was a super-mom, but even those had limits. Now, with the offer, it felt as if her worries were slowly evaporating. Maybe things were looking up after all.

0-o-III-o-0

"Anything now?"
Syal froze at the sound of a familiar voice; Green Jedi Knight Jysella Horn. And it had come from her sister's hospital room.
"Flashes, we…I…wow, who knew speaking with the right pronoun would be so hard."
"But you're getting there."

"We want to get there faster," Myri's frustration bled into her voice. "You should see the look on our sister's face when we use the wrong pronoun. It's like we…I…have contracted some disease or something. She tries to hide it, but we've been intel-trained and can read her face."
"The mind is a delicate thing, you rush it and we might do more damage to it."
"What if it's a temporary fix?"
"Temporary?"
"Syal is going back to duty at the end of the week, maybe you can hard-wire our brain for just that long? We can feel that the sessions are helping, but we cannot let her ignore her duty to the GA on account of us."
"Yeah, I do that, then she'd really kill me."
"She would never know. She's not supposed to be by here until this afternoon so we have plenty of time."
"Really? She's standing right outside the door debating whether or not to kill me with a scalpel," Jysella replied. "Make that, with her bare hands. Your sister's quite imaginative when it comes to my death."
"She is…oh…"
Syal took that as her cue to enter the room. Framing Myri's head was a tiara embedded with several white and green crystals. Standing on the opposite side of Myri's bed, as if to shield herself, was Jysella Horn, a hand still resting on Myri's forehead.
Myri glanced up to the older Jedi. "Errr…would the phrase 'this is not what it looks like' work in this situation?"
"You can always try it," Jysella shrugged.
"Okay," Myri looked to her sister. "This isn't what it looks like."
"You're having a Jedi scramble your brain even more?" Syal said archly, glaring at Jysella.
"Kind of, sort of?" Myri tried. She then sat back up, pulling the tiara off her head and glaring right back at her sister. "And before you go all 'mom' on me, I was the one who asked her to help."
Syal was about to reply, then fully registered what Myri had said. "'Me'?'I'?"
Myri seemed to realize it too, a smile breaking out. "We are cured!"
She quickly grimaced, then groaned. "Or not."
"I said it takes time," Jysella repeated.
Myri sighed dejectedly and flipped the tiara back over her head. "Being confined to a hospital bed because our pronouns are wrong isn't exactly medically sound."

"Post-Joining Syndrome is," Syal said darkly. She arched an eyebrow at the tiara. "What is that thing?"
"Jedi magic, you probably couldn't care less," Jysella answered, plucking it back off of Myri's head. "And since you're here, I should be going now."
"Syal!" Myri said in exasperation.
"Give it time, Antilles," Jysella said evenly, ignoring the outburst. "Your mind *will* recover on its own. Minds are quite resilient like that."
"Tomorrow?" Myri said quickly, sounding hopeful.
"Busy all day," Jysella shook her head. "Since many Corellians feel that the Jedi are to blame for what happened, I've been forced to find alternative means to continue the Corellian Praxeum's funding. I also have to justify the Green Jedi presence in CDF missions to a committee, for some reason. Never mind that we just saved this entire system from becoming bug-huggers or that my brother had a spotless record when advising CDF missions."
"Jysella…"
"I'll be back when I can. Probably after your sister returns to duty," Jysella said tonelessly, brushing past Syal in the doorway. "Have a good day you two."
The clicking of Jysella's boots grew distant, and again Myri glared at her sister. "Syal!"
"What?" Syal threw her arms up. "That Jedi got nearly every single Corellian killed!"
"Those were the Killiks, and you know it!" Myri shot back hotly, swinging her legs out over the bedside.
"Myri!" Syal quickly moved to catch her as she swayed, but Myri shoved her hand away.
"She was helping us!" Myri hissed, walking unsteadily to the window. In the faint reflection, the unmistakable black irises that indicated a Joiner stared back. "We were in a war, Syal. People die in wars, that's a fact. If it weren't for those Jedi, we'd all be dead or Joined."
"You don't care that we were treated like disposable pawns?" Syal shot back. "Because that's how *that* Jedi felt about us. It's how those Solos and all those other big-shots in charge treated us. Name one non-Jedi leader who'd have his or her people run combat missions almost every day of the week, the entire day! The Jedi wanted to be the heroes, wanted to stop the bugs at all costs. We could have fallen back, put some distance between our fleets and get word to the Core. Most of this galaxy doesn't even know or care about what we went through out there!"

"You want a parade?" Myri snorted. She glanced at her sister's reflection next to her own. "Accolades? Medals? Most of this galaxy is free because of what we did. You know it, I know, mom and dad too, and that's all that matters to me!"
"They threw our people into the meat-grinder with a half-cocked plan that changed by the second. How many soldiers died because the Jedi…"
"The Jedi aren't gods, sis!" Myri snapped back.
"Then they should stop acting like it!" Syal hissed. "There's even one of them as the Chief of State now! If a handful of Jedi could get a million plus soldiers killed in a poorly planned battle, what will one do leading this galaxy? Come on, Myri. You wouldn't even be needing that Jedi's help if it weren't for the fact that she was the one who sent your unit on that mission in the first place."
"A mission our entire squad agreed to go on, knowing the risks, knowing that we could end up dead or worse. But if our intel could keep hundreds, thousands of others alive, then we think it's a good trade off, don't you?"
"You wouldn't have been in that position in the first place if the Jedi had done more! Had done something else then turn our forces into a punching bag. Nearly every Corellian that followed Jysella Horn out there is dead. Yet she's still alive. So is that Omwati apprentice and the Falleen Knight, whatever their names are."
"The Jedi lost just as many people in the war," Myri turned away from the window to look at her sister. "Jysella lost her older brother, lost a friend named Seff Hellin. They sent their greenest people out there because the politics at the Core didn't believe the Killik threat was serious enough to warrant all their masters and knights. If you want to blame anyone for the people we lost, blame the politicians who talked the talk but came up short when it mattered."
Syal shook her head back and forth very slowly. "You have your opinion, Myri. But I'll tell you this, there's no way I'm going to put anyone under my command in the hands of a Jedi again. You lost your squad, once. Each battle I was in, the squad I was with was decimated. You want to know why? Because some Jedi thought that it'd be a good idea to send a hundred snubfighters against thousands."
"We signed up to bleed and die for the civilians in the galaxy." Myri walked back to her bed. "So did you. If it weren't those hundreds of pilots dying, it would have been millions, billions on an inhabited planet. You might only see things from that tiny cockpit of yours, Syal. *I* am in intel, *I* have to see the big picture. What other choice did the Jedi

have? Let the bugs through? Every single system in the Murgo Choke would have been decimated."
"That would have given the politicians in the Core a wakeup call," Syal said. "Would have rallied the systems and presented a more unified defensive front."
"At the same time plunging the economy of the Mid and Outer Rim systems into chaos, disrupting fragile trade routes, and sending millions of refugees fleeing to systems already overburdened with Vong-war refugees. Quit thinking like a grunt. The Jedi spared the galaxy the lasting damage that expanded war would have caused. At the expense of our lives, yes. But if we recall, the call-to-arms that Solo put out was an entirely voluntary one."
"We trusted them to get us back alive."
"No, we trusted them to get the job done. To protect the galaxy again, just as they did in the Vong War."
"Myri."
"We are discharging ourselves from the hospital tomorrow," Myri said evenly. "The doctors cannot do any more. We only stayed as long as we did for both yours and mom's sakes."
"Jedi Horn suggest that?"
"She suggested I return to the field, yes. We agreed."
"Rejoining Corellian Intelligence?"
"No," Myri shook her head. "The head of Cor-Intel came by and said that we had been 'compromised'. Would not allow us to return until the doctors were certain the Joining had been undone."
"Then what?"
"Colonel Tainer of Wraith Squadron stopped by after you and the Prime Minister left the other day. Apparently Jedi Master Horn put in a word for us, so the colonel gave us a job interview. We passed."
Syal couldn't help but laugh bitterly. "Now isn't this ironic, you're going from Corellia to the GA, and I'm going in reverse."
"Syal?"
"The Prime Minister stopped by the house at dinner time last night. Offered me a post in the CDF."
"Good, then you can keep mom company while she looks after dad."
"Wraith Squadron accepted you even when you're like this?"
"The colonel said that I would fit right in, even gave me a new call-sign."
Knowing Wraith Squadron's proclivity for odd call-signs, Syal took a guess. "Bug-girl?"
"How species-ist," Myri glared. "Just for that, we won't tell you."
"Okay, sorry, please tell me?"

"Corellian Queen, C-Q for short," Myri said proudly. "Colonel Tainer said that it would suit our speech patterns just fine."
Syal just sighed. "As long as you're happy, sis."
Myri's expression sobered slightly as she reclined in the bed, starring up at the ceiling much like Syal had done the night before. "We wouldn't say happy. Joining…we didn't think a happiness, a contentment like that ever existed. It's like a happy-drug and warm hug mixed into one."
"Myri…"
"Don't worry, sis. We're okay. It's just…when the Joining gives you a perfect memory, you can clearly remember what it was like being a part of the Kind. Would it be wrong to say it was the best and happiest time of our life?"
"Yes, very much," Syal said. "It was a false happiness. You weren't *you*."
"We know, the shrinks we were forced to see say that too. Doesn't stop us from feeling it though," Myri shrugged, voice growing distant. "And it's not just us you know. We know a couple hundred Corellian Joiners we brought back who are also 'recovering'. We might not hear the star-song any more, but it doesn't stop us from missing it. To know that billions of other beings care about your cares, worry about your well-being, want you to be happy."
"Colonel Tainer's allowing you to go back to duty like this?"
"It's something Jysella's been helping me out with," Myri answered with a shrug. "Her family apparently has a niche in Jedi mind-stuff."
Syal couldn't help but worry. "And if she makes things worse?"
"Then she makes things worse, but she was able to pry another Jedi free of the Joining, and she was Joined for longer than I was."
Pursing her lips, Syal didn't say anything. She glanced back out the window. "I'll be seeing mom and dad after this, let them know I'm staying. Want me to pass a message along or something?"
"Tell them…tell them we…I…am recovering faster than expected. That *I* will be returning to duty shortly," Myri forced out.
"So you want me to lie to her?" Syal shook her head. "You do know that we haven't gotten away with a single lie to her since we were kids?"
"Well, we *are* returning to duty," Myri said sheepishly. "Maybe the truth part will cover the lie and she'll be too worried about dad to notice."
"You forget, she's the one who managed five different intel operations while I was in bacta after that Pulsar Station incident. Multi-tasking and emotional compartmentalization is her thing."
"Strangely enough, we did forget," Myri said dryly. "In fact we don't remember that at all."

"Oh…sorry."
"Don't be. We…*I*… will be fine, Syal. Don't worry."
"You're my little sister, that's kind of impossible."
Myri smiled. "The Swarm War is over, new Chief of State, senators, new Prime Minister. Things are going to be changing, Syal. We'd like to think that it'll be for the better."
Syal rested a hand on Myri's shoulder. "So do I."
Myri reached up and placed her hand on top of Syals, the two sisters sharing a small smile as the morning sunlight streamed through the window in shimmering bars of golden light.

0-o-IV-o-0

Jedi Knight Jysella Horn felt like she had to be doing *something*, even as she sat on the rooftop garden of the Corellian Jedi Praxeum in meditation. The stillness, the calm, after being on edge for almost three-quarters of a year, was completely alien to her. She half expected to be interrupted by the klaxon alarms of another Killik attack, or hear explosions or screams of soldiers caught in an ambush. Instead, the only sounds were the chirping of birds and the rustling of the leaves in the trees.
Try as she might, she just couldn't center herself. The busy city of Coronet bustled about below, the lanes of speeder traffic, the people walking to and from their various destinations. The sun continued to blaze above, filtering through the canopy of leaves and branches from the trees that lined the garden's perimeter.
Opening her eyes, she watched the daily happening for several long moments, eyes hardened with a hint of confusion. She wondered how everyone else could be going about their business as usual, how everything could be so *peaceful* after the horrors she'd seen in the Unknown Region. Yes, the announcement was made that over a hundred thousand Corellians died in the fighting, but unless people had a direct connection to those dead, it seemed like they could care less. Holo-ads still blinked on at passing traffic, hawking a variety of wares. Arguments over the pettiest of things breaking out on some distant rooftop, a speeder crash in a distant block, a sports game being broadcasted for all to see.
Vibrant, hectic, an orderly chaos. It was city life at its fullest.
And completely alien to Jysella.
It shouldn't have been. She had spent the better part of her teenage years Corellia, in Coronet. She had been the diplomat, the people-person to her brother's cold-logic military side. She had traveled countless streets from uptown to downtown, the suburbs and the industrial sectors. Had met with the business leaders of many

corporations, Corellian Engineering, Coronet Manfacturing, Coronet Foundry. The city had been just another aspect of the Force, pulsating with its own energies like the beat of some exotic dance music. But where before Jysella had heard rhythms, harmonies, she now heard only discordant tones.
As if the entire planet had changed while she had been a way.
Not the planet, she realized, her eyes closing. Her. *She* had changed. When did the rooftop gardens, such a peaceful place, become so uncomfortable? Why did the city no longer sound the same as it did before she had left? Jysella tried to meditate on those questions, but couldn't find the serenity to do so.
Frustrated, tearful brown eyes snapped open and she hopped up from her kneeling position to a standing one.
"Jysella I heard you were back and I…" Tarc trailed off as he caught sight of Jysella's almost expressionless, but pained face. "Sella?"
"Tarc?" Jysella made a brief gesture.
Tarc blinked, looked at Jysella again. She seemed just fine, a small but controlled smile on her face. He paused for another moment, wondering if he had imagined the whole thing. Shaking his head to clear it, he smiled. "I heard you were back planet-side for the rest of the week and I wanted to know if you were free for dinner sometime."
"Dinner?" Jysella repeated, almost in disbelief.
"Yeah, you know, the meal us mortals have to eat at night? I gave a tour to the owner of the Brillie, that high-end restaurant downtown, the other day. He apparently liked it so much, he said I could bring a friend to eat with and skip over that three-month reservation list."
"You want to have dinner, with me," Jysella said.
Frowning at the confusion in her voice, Tarc nodded again. "Yeah, that's kind of why I'm asking you. Sella, are you okay?"
"Tarc," Jysella said with a forced calm. "There are currently sixty-five thousand wounded Corellian soldiers being cared for. I have three reports I have to prepare for three separate committees about those soldiers, and explain why a hundred thousand plus more weren't able to make it back. There are three Five World senators proposing bills to divest the Corellian Praxeum of any political power or ability to act without the approval of the Corellian senate. On top of that I also have my regular duties as a Jedi, caring for the Vong war refugees and trying to ensure their camps remain livable. When do you think I have the time to drop everything just so I can dress up and pretend the galaxy has no problems by eating ridiculously overpriced food with you?"

Tarc's expression didn't change. "You could have just said 'no thank you.'"
"No thank you, then," Jysella said, shaking her head. "Right now, Tarc. I don't have time for this…for us or whatever we are. You stick to what you're good at doing, giving tours to rich people. I'll stick to what I'm good at doing, preserving those locations you show off to the rich people because idiot politicians think that knocking it down to create a new sky-rise is a good idea."
"DonoSlaine Excursions thank you," Tarc said back. "You've changed, Sella. And not for the better."
"If I changed, I changed into whatever this galaxy needed me to be to get the job done. The Force guides everything, remember. I didn't choose to become like this, the Force decided I'd be better off like this.
"Well, I don't believe in the Force any more than I believe in Kolot's hunting deities."
"You're at the Jedi Praxeum and you don't believe in the Force?"
"That it exists, yes I believe it. That it's some type of mystical religious thing that controls people's destinies, nope," Tarc took a seat on a bench and stretched his arms out along the back rest. "The way I see it, blaming some religion or mystical power for your lot in life is a lousy excuse. Look at me. My entire family was killed on Coruscant when I was ten, had a corrupt senator rearrange my face so I'd look like Anakin Solo, I was a Vong slave at eleven. And then, through pure luck, I ended up helping some renegade Vong overthrow the Peace Brigade and was then adopted by Kirney and Myn. Tell me, what part of the Force can take into account any of that?"
"You're not a Jedi, you wouldn't understand."
"And I probably wouldn't want to," Tarc said. "If understanding turns you into someone bitter at the world. When I confronted Viqi Shesh on Ylesia, I wanted nothing more than to blast that schutta into oblivion. But then, I took a second look at her, realized that doing so would be a waste of blaster bolt. You can be angry at the galaxy, at the Force, at whatever mystical energies guide your life, but all you'll do is make everyone around you miserable. Or, you can suck it up, try to make the best out of the situation, and let others in to help you out when times get tough."
"Tarc, I just don't have the time."
"You're not the only Jedi in this giant building you know."
"Two Corellian Knights were killed in the war. Natua's in bacta and is getting fitted for a prosthetic leg. Tiu's also in bacta. Dad's trying to help heal the thousands of Joiners we saved. All the other masters are occupied and all the other apprentices are too young to handle this

mess," Jysella iterated mildly. "Considering it was my desire to help Anakin out that got the Corellian government to send the fleet, I need to handle the aftermath of the mess too."
"So you're saying that all those Corellians that died are your fault?"
"I didn't say that."
"Sure sounded like that. You're the one who wanted to help out, you're the one who got the government to give you a fleet. Therefore you're the one who has to answer all the hard questions, all by yourself. If you forgot, Jysella, your dad, a Jedi Master, approved of all those actions. Heck, the entire Corellian Praxeum agreed to send you, your dad, and all those other Corellian Jedi to help. Even Prime Minister Teppler, who had just been elected, agreed to send the CDF to help you out. Now, I thought I'd phrase it as a request, but that was my mistake. You're having dinner with me tonight at the Brillie, and for those few hours you're going to forget about it all. If not, I'll tell the Corellian Jedi Masters that you're a hairsbreadth away from going dark because they're lumping everything onto you."
"Really?" Jysella arched an eyebrow. "You do realize that all I have to do is wave my hand and you'll forget about this plan of yours."
"Yeah, but then wouldn't you just be proving me right?" Tarc countered, looking completely relaxed. Seeing her skeptical expression, he elaborated. "After staring down homicidal Vong and fanatic Peace Brigaders, a near-psychotic ex-girlfriend barely rates."
"'Near-psychotic?'" Jysella couldn't help but snort at that. "What are you, a psychologist now?"
"Kirney and Myn are veterans in their own little way," Tarc said, eyes tracking a bird in the sky. "When I told them I was going to ask you to a welcome-back dinner, they gave me a little pep-talk about what I should expect. Strangely enough, everything they've said has been true so far. Dinner, tonight at seven. I'll pick you up."
"Tarc," Jysella said in faint protest.
Tarc stood again, slinging his jacket back over his shoulder. "See you there, Sella. Welcome back."
She reflexively reached out and gripped his hand to keep him from leaving. "I can't."
"Can't or won't?" Tarc challenged. "You saying that you can stare down bug-armies but a dinner with me makes you flee in terror? If you have to, think of it as a mission to get me off your back."
Jysella let her hand fall back to her side, nodding silently.
"Good, see you then,"
She watched him leave, unable to believe the conversation that had just happened. Had she really just agreed to have dinner with him? To

actually relax when she had so much to do, so many lives to try and fix because of her quest to finish what her brother had started?
She groaned. So much for trying to finish her meditation. A bird in a nearby tree let out a series of squawks that almost sounded like laughter. Jysella shot it a dirty look, but the bird didn't seem to care.
"Great, now I have a dinner date," she muttered to no one in particular.
She walked to the railing at the edge of the rooftop and stared down at the city below. It just seemed so far removed from everything that had happened the past few months. *Could* she possibly enjoy a peaceful dinner with no life-threatening aspects anywhere in sight?
Giving up on meditation, on relaxing, Jysella decided to head back inside. If she was going to take the evening off, she had a mountain of reports to work on. Such was the other half of the life as a Jedi.

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Jysella looked at herself in the mirror, the dress she had on was a modified Jedi tunic in the same earthen tones as most Jedi outfits. It wasn't her fault that she hadn't a single piece of fancy clothes to wear to the upscale restaurant Tarc was taking her to. Jedi just don't 'dine out' at fancy places, indulge in the hedonistic aspects of life, because it was against their moral responsibilities… or something like that. She had attended many state dinners, private meals of executives wishing to ingratiate themselves with the Corellian Jedi. Jedi robes were an all-purpose attire, appropriate for both battle and high-end diplomatic functions. Evidently the ancient Jedi of old didn't count on the recent Jedi of new okaying dating and marriage. Thus they didn't use their great powers of foresight to make an appropriate Jedi 'dating outfit'.
Not a date, just a dinner between friends, Jysella mentally reminded herself. The last thing she wanted was to complicate her life more by restarting her romance with Tarc.
"Not bad."
Jysella saw her mom's reflection and rolled her eyes. "'Not bad'? You do know this vest and tunic is meant to be worn to Knighting ceremonies and other semi-formal Jedi events?"
"Your dad has a similar robe," Mirax nodded. "Slightly darker in color. I think it makes him look more Jedi-y than I'd like though."
"Exactly," Jysella groaned, sitting down at the edge of her bed with her face in her hands. "The last thing I want to do is walk into a place like the Brillie and let everyone know I'm a Jedi. Force, why does the Jedi Order have to be the walking advertisement for the most boring clothing line ever!?"
"Good thing you have an amazing mother who has contacts who have contacts and knew that this would happen," Mirax said, pulling out the

hand she had tucked behind her back to reveal a sleeveless, glimmering black dress with golden embroidery. "I picked up something for you while you were running about fixing the galaxy."
Jysella, still looking into her hands, just sighed. "Mom, I'm twenty-one, I don't need he…" She had looked up, her eyes growing round at the dress.
"Yes?"
"Never mind, you're an amazing mom," Jysella said, standing and jaw dropping.
"Can't take all the credit. Grandpa had a hand in procuring it. Cyrene silk top, vine-silk gloves, don't ask how grandpa got it. I didn't want to know either, especially since he got it at such short notice." Mirax passed the dress onto to her daughter, then reached down by the door to pick up a pair of high-heels. "Think these are good enough for the Brillie?"
Jysella nodded mutely, her vision swimming.
"You really going to ruin that make up already?" Mirax laughed softly, pulling her daughter into a one-armed hug. "You know, I didn't think this day would ever come."
"Huh?"
"Well, since you joined the Jedi Order at such a young age, I didn't think there'd ever be a day you'd get to wear something other than Jedi clothes. I mean, I have this whole wardrobe of tops your father would have a heart-attack with if he sees you in them, but when was the last time you saw a Jedi wear anything even remotely provocative?"
Jysella couldn't help but giggle, shaking her head despite the torrent of emotions cycling through her.
"Right," Mirax picked up a brush from the table in front of the mirror and began working at the non-existent kinks in Jysella's hair. "Remind me to thank Tarc for giving me an opportunity to play dress-up with my daughter. I figured the next time this is going to happen is when Hoth warms over."
"Mom," Jysella said almost timidly.
"Hmmm?"
Jysella took a deep breath, her vision swimming. "I…I really don't want to go out to the Brillie. I can't take all this quiet stillness. I have to be doing *something*. And every time I sit around, or dress up, or think about having dinner at one of the most expensive restaurants on Corellia, I can't help but think about the countless other things I should be doing because I'm a Jedi. The things that *really* matter, *really* make a differences. Why should I be relaxing, eating over-priced food, when

there are refugees in camps across this planet just scraping by? Every day someone needs something from the Jedi Order, and we can't just ignore them. Valin poured his whole life into helping keep the Corellian system stable. He even missed a few holidays because he was taking care of pirates, lost refugees, and other larger problems. And since he's…he's with the Force now, I have to continue doing what he started too…otherwise, everything he fought and *died* for might go to waste and I can't…I am not…."
Jysella couldn't even finish her sentence as tears poured freely down her cheeks, her body shaking with silent sobs. Mirax silently drew her daughter to her in a gentle hug, rubbing her back soothingly as she did.
"I'm not nearly the Jedi he was," Jysella whimpered softly, clinging to her mom. "I can't do everything he did. I try, but it's never enough. There's always something else…*always*. And every time…every time, I have to keep pushing myself, I have to keep going, because it's what he would have done. Valin never gave up. Even with the bug war, even surrounded and knowing that the only way he could save us was to sacrifice himself, he fought to the very end. And I don't even have any bugs to squash now that the war's over. What do I do mom? I…"
"Sella," Mirax said tenderly, pulling back slightly to look Jysella in the eyes.
Jysella fell quiet, tears continuing to travel down her cheeks.
"You've been traveling at lightspeed these past few months, and then somebody's decided to pull the emergency brakes. What you're going to do is learn to live slowly. One minute at a time, one hour at a time, one day at a time," Mirax reached out to wipe one of the tear tracks away. "Forget about your reports, forget about the fact that you're a Jedi, or the buildings that need to be built, the treaties and laws that are being created. All of that. One minute, one hour, one day, you're going to rebuild yourself with tiny goals. Like, in the next minute, your goal is to put on those very nice silk gloves your grandfather acquired through probably not-too-legal-means. The minute after that, you're going to focus on putting on the dress, then the shoes. In an hour, you'll have practiced walking in those high-heels since you've lived most your life in those Jedi boots of yours. One minute, one hour, one day. Once you've gotten that mastered, take life in bigger chunks. One week, one month, and so on."
"One minute, one hour, one day," Jysella repeated softly, eyes downcast.
"Exactly," Mirax murmured. "I'm going to talk with your father, give you some leave time. You've taken way too much on your shoulders."

Jysella's head shot up, an almost desperate glint in her eyes. "But I *need* the work, the pressure. I…"
"Need to relax," Mirax said with a hint of firmness. "You're wound up tighter than a hyperdrive coil. There are other Jedi who can take up the work load."
"The other Jedi are all on one assignment or another," Jysella shook her head. "And they don't know the politicians and the heads of the refugee camps like I do. What if…"
"They will learn from their mistakes, just like you did when you first started off," Mirax again interrupted. "And quit looking ahead, Jysella. That's neither in the next minute, hour, or day. What you're going to focus on right now is that nice dinner Tarc's planned for you."
"Then what?" Jysella said hoarsely. "I can't just forget, let everything go."
"When was the last time you danced?" Mirax said with a ghost of a smile.
"Huh?"
"The way you're acting right now, I was just reminded of a moment almost a year ago. Broken from everything she had seen, desperate for direction, for reassurance, a young Jedi woman came to this very house. But she found the family life uncomfortable, a reminder of everything she had lost so she fled back out into the solitude of night. Another Jedi, who had come to admire her, who knew that there was still good in that Jedi despite what everyone else thought, went out to her then. Together, they danced away her pain, reminded her who and what she fought for."
Jysella felt a fresh set of tears sit in her eyes. "I…I can't. I don't want to dance anymore."
"I think Alema and her sister would be disappointed, you know," Mirax changed tracks. "To see their prized student throwing aside all that talent."
"They'd understand."
"They'd understand that you're taking the easy way out. It might bring up painful memories, but I promise that the good ones will surface too. After your dinner with Tarc, dance again, Jysella. Dance until you find that beat again. Find that rhythm that filled you with life and happiness."
"I'll try," Jysella said almost reluctantly.
"Do you really want me to quote that tiny old green Jedi at you?" Mirax arched an eyebrow.
"Fine, I'll do it," Jysella smiled a ghost of a smile. "Just…don't expect anything to happen. I haven't felt like dancing in forever."

"As long as you don't expect anything to happen either," Mirax impressed upon her daughter. "Complicated emotional things take time, doubly so if you're a Jedi. Stop living at lightspeed and slow down to a more mortal pace. Trust me on this, okay?"
Jysella wet her lips and nodded, picking up the pair of silken gloves again. "Thank Grandpa Booster for the dress and stuff. Probably the first 'nice' outfit I've ever worn."
"I'll let him know. You should have seen how excited he was to get his granddaughter something that wasn't 'Cor-Sec Jedi inspired'."
Jysella did laugh at that. "Thanks…mom."
"Pep talks and fancy dresses are what moms are for," Mirax hugged her daughter again. "Stop growing up so fast, Sella. Really takes all the fun out of life when you do."
"I'll try, mom, I really will."
"And that is all I can hope for," Mirax caressed Jysella's face affectionately. "Now starting getting dressed. You only have a few hours before that dinner of yours."
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"You okay? You seem more…We don't know, relaxed," Myri Antilles commented.
Jysella shrugged. "Just taking things one minute, one hour, one day at a time. Kind of my new mantra now."
"Well you Jedi are all about patience and meditation and thinking about thinking." Myri followed Jysella's movement through the hospital room. "Not sure we could ever live like that. We were a bit surprised when we got your message though. Thought you had to get ready for those big senate hearings and political mess the war caused."
"Corellian Masters gave me some time off," Jysella replied, rolling her eyes at her mom's meddling in Jedi business. Evidently Mirax had talked to Corran, who talked with the other Masters, who all agreed that she had been asked to do too much. Never mind that the Corellian Jedi, Green Jedi, could scarcely afford to give anyone time off now that they were independent from the greater Jedi Order. Or that, thanks to the Swarm War, they were two-thirds the size they had once been. The Masters all thought that giving her time off would help.
Unfortunately, this meant the Jysella had far too much time on her hands, too much time to think and stew and do all sorts of things that her Jedi assignments would normally have kept her away from. She let out a breath, staring at the still dark morning sky.
"Lucky *me* then," Myri said carefully.

"How's the un-Joining coming along?" Jysella asked, opening her knapsack and pulling out a few focusing crystals and the tiara-like headband.
"Slowly," Myri picked at her sheets. "Being Joined, it's peaceful and everything, but it's like everything is moving at a slug's pace. You're one person, but at the same time you're sharing the thoughts of billions, seeing multiple stars and suns and planets and cities all at once. Regular human brains just can't process all that so it's like moving through syrup, almost like overloading a HoloNet site with too much data. *I* can think in the singular now, but when it comes time to talk, that jump doesn't make it to our…*my,* damn it…mouth. It's infuriating."
Jysella couldn't help but laugh softly, catching the attention of Myri. "Something funny?"
"Ironic more like. Here I am living, according to my mom, at 'lightspeed' and trying to slow down. Here you are, at slug-speed trying to reach where I am. Is slug-speed really that bad?"
Myri closed her eyes, smiling. "We wouldn't say bad. It's just…We guess both Syal and us have inherited dad's fighter-pilot-have-to-be-somewhere genes. Sitting in this hospital bed, being treated like someone who's mentally deficient, a basket-case, we just want to go back out there. See the galaxy and all its dirty little secrets. Looking out at the stars every night, we have to wonder just how much of that galaxy is passing us by every second we're sitting here on this bed."
"I know the feeling," Jysella said, placing the tiara onto Myri's head. "Both my mom and Tarc have told me that I should start taking it easy, try to get back to living a normal life that doesn't involve battle-plans, late night emergency alarms, and the constant fear of death. But I…I don't have clue where to begin. I've been trained since a little girl to be a Jedi, protector of the weak, vanquisher of darkness, and all those other things. Never once has anyone trained me to live a 'normal' life. To tell me how to live at slug-speed. Every time I try to slow down, even think about doing so, my mind immediately snaps back to those thousands, millions of people I could be helping otherwise."
"*I* know, right?" Myri said, her eyes lighting up. "It's like we've seen so much, know exactly how bad the galaxy can get, and yet we're told to take it easy, to take our time to heal. But how can we knowing about all those threats, all those monsters in the night that are taking advantage of every second we're 'relaxing'."
"I had dinner with Tarc last night," Jysella said conversationally, switching topic.
"Oh, how'd that go?"

"Not quite a disaster, but not something I'd want to do again either."
"What happened?"
"Things started out fine," Jysella took a seat next to Myri's bed and began to focus on the Force. "But then someone popped a cork and I mistook it for a blast-bug going off. Another table was celebrating someone's birthday and I mistook their cries of happiness and celebration for ones of panic and pain. I was such a bundle of nerves, I didn't even remember what I ate or what we talked about. I'm only grateful that guy got us a private booth since I literally jumped out of my chair several times looking for a lightsaber I had left at home."
"That stinks, I…ouch!" Myri suddenly inhaled at the Force-connection to her mind.
"Sorry about that, got a bit too emotional," Jysella quickly dialed back the pressure.
"It's okay," Myri answered, her eyes fluttering. "Hey, wait, do whatever it is you're doing again."
Raising an eyebrow, Jysella sent an emotional spike into Myri's brain, a combination of bittersweet and embarrassment.
"That memory!" Myri gasped aloud. "That was the time we got dad a holocron for his birthday, spent our monthly allowance on it, only to learn that it was actually a fake after giving it to him! We…*I* was ten years old."
"Interesting," Jysella muttered. "Can I try something else?"
"Yes please," Myri said almost plaintively.
Concentrating on Myri's mind, Jysella followed up on the small memory fragment, using her abilities to help reconstruct the events immediately before and after. The 'before memory' was unveiled with jolts of eager hope, of anticipation. The 'after' mapped out with injections of resolve and determination. Myri's mind worked and digested information at lightning speeds, the reason why she was so good an operator.
Myri gripped the sheets of her bed, her jaw clenching as the memory unfolded in a series of chains, each unlocked with corresponding emotional prompts. "Gods it hurts."
'Do you want me to stop?"
"No, keep going," Myri managed to get out, gasping in pain. "We have to remember who we are. We don't want to put my family through any more pain by forgetting things like dad's birthday…and trips through ventilation shafts…" She giggled despite the pain, tears escaping eyes tightly closed. "So that's what Syal meant by the look on Booster's face. Booster….oh, he made the guy who scammed me give me a full

refund and a bonus for my troubles…How could I forget that! And… ugh…hurts…keep going..,."
Jysella exhaled shakily. "Only a little more then, your mind can't take much more."
"As much as it can take then," Myri panted, groaning in pain again. Of course, her distress set off a series of alarms from the hospital equipment around her room. "Oh Bantha poo."
A team of on-call doctors swarmed into the room.
"I'm okaaaay," Myri yelped. "Okay…okay. Just experimental Jedi healing thingy."
Though Myri had her eyes closed and couldn't see the reaction, Jysella saw a combination of skeptical and fearful looks thrown her way. Wryly, she glanced at the lead doctor. "If it'll make you feel better, you can call her older sister and she can hold a blaster to my head while I do this. If not, please disconnect those blasted machines and leave the room, I need to concentrate."
The doctors muted the machines and hesitantly edged back out of the room.
"You know," Myri panted. "Argh, I don't think this is what people mean when they say their life is flashing before their eyes."
"I'm stopping now, your brain is starting to react negatively."
"*Now* it's reacting negatively?" Myri laughed, then groaned. "What was it doing when you were having all those memories pop up?"
"Reacting un-positively," Jysella replied, letting her hands fall to her side. She let out a groan of her own, surprised at how draining the session had been. "We must have done something right, I'm completely wiped."
"What'd you do different?" Myri asked, then reached up to her nose when she felt something running. "Besides pop a few blood vessels. It's a good thing Syal's not here or she'd freak."
Jysella handed her a tissue, and did a brief scan to ensure she didn't cause any permanent damage. She felt a strange disconnect from reality as she reflected on Myri's question. "Got more emotionally involved I guess."
"Huh?" Myri used one hand to hold the tissue to her nose and the other to hand Jysella the tiara.
"Memories based on emotions are stronger, last longer," Jysella explained, shaking herself from her thoughts. "When I accidently jolted your mind with what I was feeling from the dinner, it stirred your own brain into finding a similar situation."
"How come you didn't do it before?"

"Jedi are taught to separate their emotions when they do delicate things with the Force. Brain-surgery and memory reconstruction kind of count as delicate."
"So you tried something different?"
"Not really," Jysella bit her lower lip in embarrassment. "I guess, I've had a lot of emotions running about today…yesterday, and things kind of spilt over. I'd probably get ten different lectures about the damage I could have caused if this gets out."
"I certainly won't tell. I'll leave the Jedi mumbo-jumbo to you," Myri said. She then brightened again. "I said 'I'! There! I did it again! And again!"
"Temporary," Jysella said, cautioning her. "The neural pathways are currently forced open so the memories we just dug up and pieced together will probably be as vivid as all those other ones the Killiks let you keep. Once the mental inflammation, so to speak, subsides, you'll still have the memories but will probably go back to speaking in third-person."
"Aww, really?" Myri groaned. "And I'm guessing what we did burned my brain out a little bit so we need to wait a while before we do it again?"
"Unfortunately, yes."
"Fine, I guess I should take advantage of this opportunity and say "I' as many times as I can. I, I, I, I."
"Glad you're so happy," Jysella couldn't help but smile.
"Are you kidding? Every time I speak in third person or third-person possessive, the doctors, my family, everyone looks at me like I'm speaking Ewokese or something. How long do I have to wait for the next session?"
"Not sure, like I said, what I just did isn't exactly Jedi sanctioned. I was injecting some of my own emotions into your brain to stimulate it into finding memories that matched the emotion. I went basic this time around and followed the chains of memories that popped up. I'm not sure what would happen if I gave your brain an emotion it didn't have a corresponding instance for."
"Aren't emotions universal?"
"Yes, but the depths of some emotions aren't," Jysella answered, putting away the focusing crystals. "For example, if I shared with you what I was feeling the second I felt my brother vanish from the Force, you probably would have been more damaged than anything."
"Oh…" Myri paused.
"Myri!" Syal's voice came from the hallway.
"I guess the doctors really did call her," Jysella muttered.
The Corellian pilot sprinted into the room, blaster in one hand.

"And he really told her to bring her blaster too," Myri blinked. "Hi sis. No need for that. I'm better, well kind of, I think. Jedi Horn said it's sort-of temporary and that I should be reverting back to my buggy self when my brain gets over her experimental Jedi treatment…"
Syal stopped in her tracks, eyes darting from her sister, the Jysella, the light from the morning sun streaming through the window and bathing the room in a golden light. Her sister was smiling broadly, while Jysella was standing off to the side with a guarded expression on her face. Then, realizing what her sister had said, Syal's eyes widened. "What?"
"I'm partially cured, we, as in Jedi Horn and I and not the royal bug we, think." Myri repeated excitedly.
"Really?" Syal gaped.
"We'll probably need a few more treatment sessions," Jysella said softly. "But I think I have a handle on what will speed up her recovery."
"And the blood coming from her nose?" Syal gestured to the blood-dyed tissue.
"I wanted Jedi Horn to push me to my limits," Myri said in Jysella's defense. "Now we, she and I, know that her mystical Jedi healing technique thingy can actually work so we can moderate it. Right?"
"Yes," Jysella nodded. "I can go over what I did and come up with a regimen that will not only help your sister, but probably many of the other Joiners as well. The only downside is that I do not see the Corellian Jedi Masters outright endorsing such a technique."
"What? Why not?" Syal frowned.
"As I told your sister, Jedi are taught to keep their emotions out of what they are doing. When emotions get involved, things get difficult, can go wrong. When passion, anger, and darker emotions are involved, the technique is said to be a 'dark side' technique and is roundly shunned and forbidden."
"So you used a forbidden, experimental technique on my sister's brain."
"Syal!"
"When you put it that way, yes," Jysella answered.
"Didn't you tell me the other day that if given time, she'd recover on her own?"
"Syal! I was the one who…"
"It's okay, Special Operator Antilles," Jysella said evenly. "I did say that. But some of the Joiners are nowhere near her current state, might not ever recover on their own, and the technique I used will more than benefit them if done properly. Are you going to deny them the same opportunity your sister has at recovering her memory because of your fear of Jedi and our techniques?"

"I'm not afraid," Syal glared. "But just like over Ilum and in the Unknown Regions, it sounds as if you barely know what you are doing. What I'm worried about is that you're going to do more damage than good in your half-baked attempt to make things right. If we were pawns to you in the battlefield, why do you care about what happens to the soldiers and Joiners after the war?"
"Because the war is over now," Jysella answered softly, making no move to leave the room. The rising sun shone brightly behind her, illuminating her in its light. "The war is over and now we heal. All of us. You, me, the soldiers, the Joiners, everyone. There's been enough death, enough hate and mistrust, if I can make one small difference by helping your sister, I will."
"But why?"
"Because," Jysella continued, her eyes flickering up to hold Syal's steely gaze. "We may be soldiers in war, or ambassadors of peace. Healers of the sick, protectors of the weak. We're someone's daughter, son, sister, brother, husband, wife. Our choices affect thousands, millions, billions even, and we have to live with that burden every single minute, hour, and day of our lives. Why? Because we're Jedi. And at the end of that minute, hour, and day, that's what I am. Like my father, and my brother before me. I try to make this galaxy a better place because at the core of who I am, I am a Jedi."
0-o-Chapter End-o-0

Jaina
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Looking off into the distance of the polluted, alien world, it was hard to believe that a full three months had gone by since the end of the Swarm War. Two months since she had once again parted ways with her brothers and assumed control of the Imperial Jedi. Imperial Knights, she reminded herself with a wry grin. The Empire had responded to Denon's ultimatum to reform by officially dropping the name 'Jedi' from their own group of Force-users and severing ties with the greater Jedi Order. She, Jaina Solo, was now the commander of the Order of Imperial Knights—Force-users whose sole duty was to protect and preserve the Empire. A group which appeared to grow by the day as the Empire absorbed more territory and sent any discovered Force-users to the *Rhysode*, the mobile command center for the Imperial Knights.
A full three months since the mass funeral for the million-plus soldiers, Jedi, and other personnel who had died in the Outer Rim fighting against the Killiks. The survivors had returned to the Core fully

embittered towards the new administration, with many resigning their commissions and giving scathing interviews over the HoloNet. Their disgruntled opinions, however, were quickly white-washed over, with Kenth Hamner promising a 'Peace of a Millennium,' and heralding in the improvements already occurring throughout the galaxy. True to the nature of most beings tired of bad news, the masses preferred to look at the bright glossy holos Hamner was providing and tuned out the veterans almost entirely.

But that was neither here nor now. As commander of the Imperial Knights, she now had an official post in Grand Moff Quille's government. A post that had her stationed on Taspir Three more often than not as she and Turi Altamik faced battles of political nature.

Jagged Fel wasn't supposed to survive the onslaught. Was supposed to go out in a blaze of glory. Then Quille would have sent a much larger, heavily armed and updated fleet in to the rescue. Jagged surviving, earning the loyalty of his sector and those serving him by risking so much to protect a territory that wasn't his home, kind of ruined that plan and made for some very unhappy schemers on Taspir.

Which in turn made for business as usual in the new self-styled Third Imperium.

Rather than mope about that Jagged had survived, Quille seized on the victory as evidence that the Empire truly had returned. And he did have the facts to back it up. What was once the Imperial Remnant, isolated in a tiny corner of the Outer Rim, had quadrupled in size under Quille, stretching all the way to the Mid Rim and encroaching on the former Imperial shipyards of Bilbringi. Despite the loss of nearly the entire Imperial force sent to safeguard the Chiss sector, the Empire's five shipyards were already churning out the replacements. The added territory meant that the populations of the absorbed sectors were able to join the Imperial Navy, further replacing the soldiers lost.

Added to it all was Denon's insistence that Outer Rim security and stability was the responsibility of the Outer Rim governments, and the Imperium was more than happy to step into the power vacuum. The abolishment of the Outer Rim security fleet meant that many independent systems and sectors were suddenly feeling vulnerable, and turned to the Empire for their security needs. Already dwarfing the enfeebled Tion Hegemony in terms of spine-ward Outer Rim influence, the Third Imperium seemed to be pushing full steam ahead with their resurgent Imperial ideology.

Great for the Empire and the humans within. Not so great for the other systems neighboring the growing behemoth state and their non-human populations.

"Credit for your thoughts, Ma'am?"
Jaina stirred at Turi's Imperial accented voice. "Sorry?"
"You looked like you were somewhere else," the blonde Jedi said with a hint of a smile.
Jaina offered the younger woman a wry smirk. "Hard to believe all the things that have happened this past year."
"You're telling me," Turi sighed, shaking her head. "In the span of a year, the Chiss Ascendancy goes belly-up, you get put in charge of the Imperial Knights, and your boyfriend gets to be Moff. In the same time, I go from being the Jedi Order's ambassador to leaving the Order and becoming the Council of Moff's advisor on all things Force related. All the while I get to stay the Imperial attaché to your Order of Imperial Knights and pretty much do as I please. "
"Trade you."
"Not on your life, Solo," Turi laughed. The recent rainstorm meant that the normally polluted Taspir air was crisp for a few precious hours. "I heard that you're departing for the *Rhysode* again?"
"Using it as a glorified taxi this time around," Jaina chuckled. "'Parently there's a group of Force-sensitives on Dantoonie that I have to pick up and personally welcome into the Order of Imperial Knights."
"Good luck with that. How's the boyfriend?"
"Playing diplomat with his diverse population," Jaina answered almost ruefully.
"The Vagaari again?"
"The Vagaari…Chiss…Imperials," Jaina waved a hand absently. "You know the drill."
"Vagaari want to expand, the Chiss are paranoid that the move will spell their doom, and the Imperials are perfectly happy to let two non-human races shoot it out."
"Which would destabilize Jagged's sector and give the Grand Moff a reason to replace him," Jaina finished with a nod. "Fun times. Of course it helps that neither race really has a fleet any more thanks to the bugs."
"The one good thing to come out of the war," Turi rolled her eyes. "Deadly killing machines in the hands of non-human savages, never ends well."
"Careful, I'd think you were buying into the propaganda."
"Don't tell me you haven't thought the same things. If we had disarmed the Vagaari and Chiss when they were absorbed into the Empire, a lot of problems would go away."

"But then you'd have several hundred thousand former soldiers without jobs," Jaina pointed out. "Disgruntled, unemployed former soldiers who see the Empire as an invading force."
"Point taken," Turi breathed. "Anyways, I actually wanted to catch you before you took off. Grand Moff Quille has called a meeting of the Council of Moffs at the end of this month, mostly so the newer Moffs are put in their place and understand how the Empire is run. But there are few other things on the agenda and I would like you to be there."
Jaina mentally reviewed her monthly schedule. "I should be able to make it. What's so important though? Normally you're fine at handling the Jedi-y stuff."
"There's Altamik diplomacy, and then there's Solo diplomacy," Turi grimaced. "Trust me, you'll want to be at that meeting."
"Any spoilers?" Jaina raised an eyebrow. "Or should I be genuinely surprised for an authentic reaction?"
"The latter," Turi said, glancing almost regretfully to the older Jedi. "Grand Moff Quille is up to his old tricks again, and this time I don't think I have the wherewithal to stop him. Hopefully the Solo-name can still invoke the fear of the Force in all the newer Moffs, and even some of the more established ones."
"Okay," Jaina said. "I'll definitely try to make it then."
"Cheers," Turi smiled. "Just another day in the Empire, right?"
Jaina glanced back out across the capital city of Taspir Three, watching as the city slowly woke with the rising sun. "Just another day in the Empire."
-)[-II-](-
Arriving over Dantoonie in a Star Destroyer was something Jaina never thought she'd do. Then again, she reflected, since becoming Jagged's girlfriend, she'd done a lot of things she'd never thought she'd do. She needed to get use to the now very formal and protocol-filled nature of the Third Imperium. If she thought the Chiss was bad, the Empire was many times worse. Ranking, status symbols, the never-ending game of one-up-manship between peers, it was a far cry from the egalitarian Galactic Alliance military and Jedi Order. But in a way, it was the type of environment she thrived in. The challenge of proving that she was the best, that she was the Sword of the Jedi for a reason. The uniformity, the way the Third Imperium tried to break the galaxy down in logical patterns and categories, it was all things Jaina appreciated. Very rarely did bureaucracy hinder the military, intrude on the Order of Imperial Knights. And being in charge of said Order meant she had a lot of leeway as to what she could do with the first and second-generation Imperial Knights.

Of course some things had to change on her part. Much like Turi Altamik, Jaina's wardrobe had become more Imperial-color toned in nature. Gone were the simple brown Jedi robes that she had grown accustomed to. Her profile at the end of the bridge walkway was a far cry from a subdued, obedient Jedi. The high collar of her matte-black mantle framed the sides of her face, the flowing cape making her appear larger than her slender frame would suggest. Black, ribbed gloves covered her hands, and knee-high leather boots glinted in the bridge lighting. The rest of her Imperial black outfit gave her the rank of colonel and would not have looked out of place at any Imperial Navy parade.

"Errr…Ma'am?" Captain Avorn, the Imperial officer in charge of the *Rhysode* awaited Jaina a respectful five steps behind.

Tearing her gaze away from the bridge window and the swirling blue and green planet, Jaina cocked an eyebrow at the officer. "I don't bite, captain."

"Sorry, Ma'am. You just looked like you were lost in thought."

"Something that seems to happen a lot these days," Jaina smiled. She then regarded the captain. "What's wrong?"

"Ma'am, I know we're to pick up some more potentiates, but there is another vessel present and I believe it has the same goal in mind."

"What do you mean, captain?"

The captain gestured for Jaina to follow, and she did. "Standard procedure is to scan a planet for any potential traffic upon hyperspace reversion. Upon our scan, we detected a *Republic*-class in geo-synchronous orbit. The IFF reads it as the *Tython* of the Jedi Order."

"The *Tython*? Must be one of the newer ships Hamner got the shipyards to donate," Jaina mused. "Have you hailed them?"

"Not yet, ma'am. But given their position, they've been here for at least a day. They are located right over our target destination."

Jaina groaned. "So much for a simple drop-in and recruitment. Hail them if you will."

"Hailing," the comm-officer acknowledged.

The image of an older, dark-haired woman appeared over the holo-projector. "*Been wondering when you'd work up the nerve to call. Alexandra Winger, captain of the Tython.*"

"Winger," Jaina greeted the Force-sensitive captain. "Whatca doing out here?"

"*Oh, great. Solo. Of course the Force would have you aboard that ship. We're here for a pick up for the Yavin Four Praxium, High Council orders.*"

"Dantooine is in Imperial space now."

"*Only if you're using maps from two decades ago. The Pentastar Alignment is no longer in effect.*"
"The Raiobollo sector voted to rejoin the Empire, Winger. Their citizens are now citizens of the Empire. You can tell the Chief of State that he can't declare the Outer Rim 'hands-off' policy-wise, then come out here and hope to recruit from them."
"*Like that'll go over real well. Look, Solo. The team of Jedi I brought with me are already down on the surface, have been for the past few days. The sector may have voted to go Imp, but many of the cities on Dantooine are still GA-leaning. The shipyards at Gravlex Med are also still GA, so we do have authority to be out here.*"
"Reports I have say that there are eleven Force-sensitives on the planet, gathered from the outlying planets as well as on Dantooine itself," Jaina offered, switching the topic.
"*I have similar intel. And I know what you're thinking, but my orders are to get all eleven back to Yavin IV for training. Not one or two.*"
Jaina nodded in understanding and released a breath, her mind working quickly. "And I have orders to bring all eleven to the *Rhysode*. I tell you what, why don't we give those potentiates a choice."
"*Choice?*"
"Jedi are all about choice, right?" Jaina said. "We say our pieces, and then let them choice where they want to train."
"*I'll have to relay that to Denon and the Jedi on the ground*."
"You mentioned them before, care to tell me who's leading the recruitment?"
"*Jedi Knights Si'ada and Maika*."
"Death Knights?" Jaina's eyebrows shot up. "When'd they get used for run-of-the-mill recruiting?"
"*Since said recruitment could technically be seen as poaching*," Alexandra replied dryly. "*Look, I don't like this any more than you do, but at the same time, the potentiates have a far less likelihood of becoming Sith in the Jedi Order's praxeums than the Imperial one. I'll pass the message along both to the Death Knights and back home. Can't do more than that though.*"
"That's enough," Jaina said placatingly. "Thank you for hearing me out. Do you mind if I take a shuttle to the planet? Your team already has a head start in getting to know the potentiates, and I have some catching up to do."
"*Not my planet, go right ahead.*"
The communication's channel ended, and Jaina exhaled a long, slow breath. "Captain, have my shuttle prepared."
"And the Jedi ship, ma'am?"

"Shields stay down, weapons off-line. They won't shoot unless you do," Jaina said. "Winger's level-headed, knows Imperial protocol as well. We're technically on the same side, so there shouldn't be any problems."
"Understood, ma'am. But if there are?"
"Do not engage no matter what. We won't be the aggressors. If the worst happens, leave me on the planet and jump out. Hamner is a skilled enough politician that he won't want to anger the Empire."
"Yes ma'am. Good luck down there. I may not have the Force, but I have the feeling you're going to need it."
-)[-III-](-
'Choice' might have been the wrong choice of words, Jaina mused to herself, guiding the shuttle onto an open-aired landing pad. The average age of the potentiates was ten years old. It was all a matter of making the Imperial Knights more attractive to their young minds than the 'boring' Jedi Order.
It wasn't like she wanted to disparage her uncle's Jedi, or suggest that they were any less capable than the Imperial Knights, but the New Jedi Order definitely had a different purpose. And for once, it was a purpose she didn't exactly want to be a part of.
She could spin her wheels, burn jets, work herself to death being one of many pawns in an organization that tries to save the entire galaxy. Or she could be the dejaarik player herself and focus on righting one sizable corner of it. Some might say it was the coward's way out, ducking the responsibility all Jedi had to the galaxy as a whole, but the tactical side of her couldn't see the difference she'd make if she was always jetting off to one location or another trying to plug a leaking dam.
She was tired of watching everything she'd worked on fall to pieces a month, a year later. At least as head of the Order of Imperial Knights, she could ensure that any changes for the better stayed that way. It also helped that her job put her in constant contact with her boyfriend, and that the Empire was actually one of the more stable places in the galaxy at the moment.
Stepping out of the shuttle and into the crisp, fresh air of the agricultural planet, Jaina took a moment to enjoy the warmth of the sun and clear blue sky. Living on Taspir III, starships, there were precious few opportunities to enjoy either.
Awaiting her were several squadrons of stormtroopers as well as the recently elected Imperial governor and his close advisors.
"Colonel Solo, this is an honor," the governor saluted sharply. "I apologize for not warning you in advance of the Jedi Order contingent,

but they assured me that you'd be able to…what was the word….'feel' their presence beforehand."
Jaina came her face impassive. One of the main annoyances with gray-side Jedi was that they were not above a few mind-tricks to advance their agenda. "You are forgiven, Governor. I assume you have not let them leave the planet with the potentiates?"
"No ma'am. The potential Imperial Knights are all in the military barracks at New Dantine. We've granted the Jedi access because of their affiliation with the Galactic Alliance and New Jedi Order, however. They have full authorization."
"Of course they do," Jaina couldn't help but smile in amusement at Si'ada and Maika's complete warping of the governor. Maybe convincing the potentiates that the Imperial Knights were more awesome would be more of a challenge than she thought.
"Very well, take me to the military base. I wish to see these potentiates myself."
"Yes, ma'am."
Jaina followed the governor onto a speeder. "Governor, what is the status of the sector? I am told that there are still many who oppose the Empire's annexation."
"Oppose would be too strong a word, Colonel Solo. There are factions that wish to give the Galactic Alliance government on Denon more time, yes, but you'll find those everywhere in the Outer Rim. On the whole, the people in the Raioballo sector fully endorse the Imperial protectorship and have been very supportive of the stationing of the Two-Oh-Eight stormtrooper legion on the planet. We are currently in the process of upgrading New Dantine so that it can hold a wing of TIE fighters as well. The jobs created from the endeavor are greatly helping the local economy."
"And the fact that Gravlex Med hasn't switched over to Imperial control?" She kept her gaze forward, watching the vast fields of the Khoonda plain rush by.
"Only a matter of time, ma'am. I am personally in talks with the system's political rulers and am quite sure that it will be ours by the year's end."
"Very good governor," Jaina complimented.
"Thank you. Can I have your assistance in passing word along to the Council of Moffs of these developments? I'm afraid as a mere governor of an outer sector I do not exactly have their ear."
"I am meeting the council later this month," Jaina nodded. "I will put in a good word or two."
"Much appreciated."

Their speeder passed a military checkpoint and were waved on. Up ahead was New Dantine, a newly created settlement and a sign of Imperial investment in Dantooine. A whole city had sprung up around an equally new military base. Evidence of construction projects galore were everywhere, from the giant cranes dotting the landscape, to the scaffold-covered buildings and ceaseless convoy of loadlifters and cargo-transports. Being on the very periphery of Imperial control, it was clear that the Empire wanted to use Dantooine as one of its frontline bases and was throwing credits around like there was no tomorrow to do so.

"Have the families of the Force potentiates been cared for as well?"

"Yes, ma'am," the governor replied sharply. "As per the regulation One-Four-Nine subsection Besh, paragraph four, the families of all Force-sensitive individuals are to be given accommodations and be treated with the utmost respect until such time …"

"You don't have to quote regulations to me, governor. I was the one who wrote them up," Jaina said dryly. Indeed, it had been one of the first things she had done—with Turi Altamik's help in pushing it through the Council of Moffs—when promoted to the head of the Imperial Knights. Family had been an integral part of her development and she wasn't about to deny the potentiates with family the same. There was even a section aboard the *Rhysode* for any families that wished to stay on or visit.

The speeder pulled up to an elongated building, its coat of Imperial-black paint still shining in the bright sunlight. Despite it being a military barracks, she could hear the laughing of children and the light-hearted energy of youthful innocence pulsate from within.

She could also hear the sounds of lightsaber clashing.

Passing through the doors, she could hear cheering and merriment accompany every hiss and clash of lightsaber blades.

Following the sounds, Jaina found herself in the doorway of the rec-room. A male Falleen Jedi was sparring vigorously with Antalia Draco, their sabers definitely flourishing more than necessary to the delight of their young crowd and their families.

"Solo," Si'ada greeted, standing by the doorframe. "Been a while."

"Si'ada," Jaina acknowledged. "Sparring practice?"

"Not quite," Si'ada winced. "Jedi Knight Thann Mithric thought that hitting on and turning up his pheromone charms on your Imperial Knight was a bright idea."

Jaina just sighed. "I thought you Jedi were smarter than that?"

"Falleen, Force-sensitive, and very attractive…in a purely analytical point of view of course. It's Mithric being Mithric," Si'ada rolled her

eyes. "Besides, the two look like they're having fun so Maika and I didn't interrupt. I guess sparring is foreplay for you Imperial Knights?"
"Don't even go there," Jaina forced a laugh, feeling slightly protective of the Imperial Knight. "And speaking of going places, just what are you three doing in Imperial Space? The Council of Moffs and myself made it clear that any Force-sensitives discovered in Imperial space are ours to train."
"Yeah, and baring any official treaty or agreement with Denon, Chief of State Hamner decided to ignore that proclamation. Maika, Thann, and myself are just here because of orders from the highest authority."
"Can you go bop him on the head for me when you get back to Denon?"
"I'd have to get in line. He might be earning points with the rest of the galaxy, but he's not too popular with the Jedi Order these days."
"Well at least you haven't all drunk the juma juice."
"Go Jedi Mithric!" A vast majority of the females in the room were cheering. "Beat the Imp Jedi!"
"His pheromones are going to get him in trouble one of these days," Si'ada muttered, shaking his head.
"It's not just him," Jaina gestured with her head towards the male half of the crowd.
"Go Imperial Knight Draco! Knock that alien pretty-boy to the ground!" a majority of the males were calling out that or some variation.
"She's in a sports-bra and shorts, what do you expect," Si'ada said dourly.
"And your guy is in skin-tight pants. Nothing but skin-tight pants," Jaina retorted. "And is that a tattoo of a naked wom…"
"Wompa on his shoulder, yes," Si'ada said, gesturing to the young children in front of them. "Why a hedonistic Falleen like him chose to be a Jedi is beyond me."
The two combatants, seeing Jaina in the doorway, decided to ramp things up. The speed of their attacks suddenly became blurs, where the slightest mistake would result in the loss of life or limb. The crowd went quiet, as if realizing the massive amount of concentration going into each attack and parry.
"She's good," Si'ada breathed.
"So's your guy."
The next few seconds were filled with the sounds of red and blue blades clashing almost non-stop at one angle or another. Finally, in an act that caused everyone to suck in their breaths, the two blades flew to a halt. The point of Thann's blade was crackling mere centimeters from Antalia's chest, while her blade was a similar distance away from

his neck. Both were panting heavily, wry smirks on their faces as they tilted their heads in silent recognition of each other's skills. They deactivated their blades and bowed to one another, then turned and bowed to Si'ada and Jaina.
Si'ada performed a tilt of her head, while Jaina offered a lazy two-fingered salute in turn. The two younger Force-users then retreated to the side of the room, and Jaina stepped forward to the center, her flowing black cape helping to get everyone's attention. "Hello all, I hope the people here at New Dantine have been treating you well."
She received a round of smiles and nods from the families as well as the young potentiates watching. She smiled in turn, her public-speaking skills inherited from her mother and her father's Solo charm on full blast.
"Great, if you don't know me by now, I'm Jaina Solo. Colonel Solo or Jedi Solo if you're a stickler for ranks and rules. I'm sure the Jedi from the Jedi Order have already given you a sales pitch, so I'm going to keep it simple. You go with them, you'll be sent far away to a training facility and probably only see your family once or twice a year if at all. Then you'll be ordered all over the galaxy trying to patch up everything from upset politicians to full-blown civil wars. You go with us, you'll be guaranteed to stay in this corner of the galaxy, guaranteed to have your family nearby, guaranteed to be respected members of the Third Imperium. Go with them, you'll be whatever the Denon government has you being. Go with us, you'll be part of the Order of Imperial Knights, able to act independently with the full authority of the Council of Moffs. The choice is yours."
-)[-IV-](-
"Colonel Solo, what exactly did you say to the families down there?" Jaina looked up from the reports she had been skimming at one of the Imperial Knight instructors, Rahm Marek. "Just pointed out the facts, why?"
"The Galactic Alliance has just jumped in five more capital ships," Rahm said evenly. "Three heavy Mon Cals and two Rejuvenator Star Destroyers."
"What!" Jaina's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"
"Either that or I'm imagining the very scary battle group right outside," Rahm answered in his usual Imperial manner, gesturing with one hand while keeping the other at the small of his back.
"Oh, for the love of…" Jaina walked over to her office's viewport. Sure enough, the *Tython* now had a few big friends flanking it. "What are they thinking? Have they hailed us yet?"

"No, and they've kept their distance since emerging. I only brought them up because we are due very shortly to hear from New Dantine about how many Force-sensitives we are to take onboard. Said fleet happens to be right above New Dantine. Captain Avorn was about to summon reinforcements, but I told him to hold off."
"The last thing we want to do is escala…"
Her holo-terminal flickered on. It was the captain. "*Colonel Solo! Just received an emergency message from New Dantine Command. A Galactic Alliance commando and Jedi team have just raided the barracks and are loading the Force-sensitives and their families onto ships now!*"
"Patch me through to the GA command ship," Jaina said, her eyes wide in surprise. A second later, the captain nodded to indicate a secure transmission. "This is Colonel Jaina Solo, head of the Order of Imperial Knights. You are aware that you are in sovereign Imperial space and that your actions can be constituted as an act of aggression?"
"*Colonel, this is Jedi Master Tresina Lobi, member of the Jedi High Council. When the Imperial Remnant joined the Galactic Alliance, they agreed to send any and all Force sensitives to the instructional Institutions of the New Jedi Order to be trained as Jedi for the greater good of the galaxy. By breaking away from the Jedi Order but continuing to recruit Force-sensitives within Galactic Alliance space, the Imperial Remnant is in violation of their agreement and their oath to both the Galactic Alliance charter and the Jedi Order. We are doing what we can to prevent another generation of Sith from being trained right under our noses.*"
"The Imperial Knights are no more Sith than your Death Knights. Heck, than my brothers. It was the Chief of State who gave us the ultimatum, to alter the very foundation on which we were founded, or be cast out. The potentiates your people are rounding up right now are Imperial citizens. As per the Galactic Alliance treaty between member-states, the central government shall not interfere with or dictate to the citizens of its member-states except in cases of great crises as determined by the majority. I heard of no congressional hearing declaring the Imperial Order a crisis. By violating Imperial space and kidnapping its citizens, it is your task force…"
"*We are only doing what must be done because of your Order's refusal to accept Jedi Order oversight and mediation regarding its curriculum. We would not be here if the Imperial Remnant had not broken its treaty in the first place*."
"Colonel, their shuttles are leaving the base," Rahm said off to the side. He was conferring with several junior officers, no doubt getting an up-

to-the-second update on the events unfolding. "The base commander wants to know if he has authorization to shoot them down,"
"Remind me to contact the local Moff and have the guy replaced," Jaina grumbled.
"Tell the commander to hold fire," Rahm translated. "Nearest Imperial fleet group is five minutes out. Shall I send for them?"
"What for? So they can jump in and we can all start shooting at one and other?" Jaina shook her head. "Listen, Master Lobi, what your Order and the Galactic Alliance are doing is a grave error. Do you truly want to risk the Empire seceding from the Galactic Alliance over eleven families?"
"*The Imperial Remnant won't secede*."
"Won't they? Thanks to Chief of State Hamner, the Empire has almost complete autonomy out here in the Outer Rim. More systems in this quadrant of the galaxy look to Taspir Three to solve their problems than Denon. We're self-sufficient, have the largest navy in the Outer Rim, and quite frankly, don't need the Galactic Alliance any more. I have the ear of many influential Moffs, including the Grand Moff himself. If this is the direction the Galactic Alliance and Jedi Order are heading, then maybe it *is* time we parted ways. So you go and tell the Chief of State what I just said. Does he truly want to gamble on the membership of one of his corner-stone governments over eleven families?"
"*I will pass the word along*," Tresina said after a slight pause, and her hologram flickered out.
"The shuttles have entered the *Tython*," Rahm reported. "The fleet is still holding position."
Jaina nodded, her hands resting on her desk as she stared at the holo-projector. She highly doubted that the Grand Moff would pull the Empire out of the Galactic Alliance for this, but he'd definitely be displeased at the violation of sovereignty. But there really wasn't much he *could* do. The Galactic Alliance had truly left the Empire on its lonesome, relying on it to stabilize the region. At the same time, the Empire relied heavily on the trade and supplies that came from Galactic Alliance affiliated companies.
"Captain Avorn, I need a direct line to Taspir Three, inform the Grand Moff of what has just occurred. If possible, I would like him to stand by when the Galactic Alliance commander calls back."
"*Understood, establishing connections now*."
Jaina waited a few seconds, her gaze still focused on her desk. A minute passed, two, then ten. Finally, the image of Grand Moff Quille

appeared. "*Colonel Solo, Captain Avorn was just reading me in to the current situation.*"
"Grand Moff, thank you for taking the time to involve yourself in this matter."
"*The Order of Imperial Knights has my full support as you are well aware of, Colonel. Any violation is a grave insult not just to you, but to myself and the Empire as a whole."*
"One moment, sir, it looks like the Galactic Alliance representative is calling back," Jaina flicked on the second panel, and Tresina's image emerged. "Master Lobi, allow me to introduce Grand Moff Quille. If you did not believe my words earlier, perhaps you'd be more convinced to hear it straight from the leader of the Empire himself."
Tresina, who had opened her mouth to call Jaina's bluff, closed it, her expression one of surprise. "*Grand Moff*."
"*Master Lobi. I hear the Galactic Alliance has decided to give insult to the Empire and disrespect us after everything we have done for the great government."*
"*I…Colonel Solo said…"*
"I assure you, Colonel Solo speaks with my full authority. Should she recommend a course of action, I will impress upon the other Moffs of the wisdom of such an action. Whatever possibilities she might have mentioned, whatever repercussions Denon might have gambled on, I assure you, they are very much on the table as we speak. The Empire, of course, can ignore this violation of its space and peoples if you return the Force-sensitives to us without delay. Now if you will excuse me, I am a busy man and don't have time for these games the Chief of State seems wanting to play."
The Grand Moff hit a button, but only shut off his link to the *Tython*. His line to Jaina's ship was still very much open. Jaina, her face hard and betraying nothing, raised an eyebrow at Tresina. "Master Lobi, I have nothing but respect for my uncle and the ideals on which he is trying to build his Jedi Order. But perhaps it is a good thing that the Imperial Knights are separate. Kidnapping Force-sensitive children regardless of their wishes seems like something a Sith training academy would do, don't you think?"
Tresina's hologram flickered off without reply.
"I have your full authority? You fully support my courses of action?" Jaina said skeptically to the Grand Moff.
"*A united front to enemies of the state, Colonel. Nothing more*."
"Good, you were really worrying me there," Jaina said wryly. "I would sincerely miss those political fights Altamik and I have with your Council of Moffs if that was the case."

"*As would I*," Quille chuckled, smoothing his mustache.
"The shuttles have reappeared," Rahm said after another long pause. "Their course is back towards New Dantine."
"We won this one, Grand Moff," Jaina said evenly. "I think it's time we revisited the GA charter as well as our own Order of Imperial Knights regulations."
"*Agreed. I have heard from Colonel Altamik that you will attend the meeting at the end of the month*?"
"That is correct."
"*Then that can be one of the many things we can discuss then. Have a good day, Quille out."*
Jaina let out a very slow breath, calling on the Force to un-frazzle the many nerves that had been frazzled to bits. Rahm, now the only other occupant in her office, smirked. "And the legend of Jaina Solo grows."
"Knock that off, Marek."
"Ma'am, had it been anyone else, I can guarantee you shots would have been fired. And you did it all without telling a single lie."
"Swords can cut in multiple ways," Jaina answered with a wan smile. "Get the welcoming crews down to the hangar bay. We probably have some confused and frightened potentiates en route."
"They definitely won't forget the day they became a part of the Order," Rahm said, saluting in acknowledgment.
"Yeah," Jaina scoffed. "Just the type of memory I wanted to give them, nearly being ripped in two in a game of political tug-of-war. This isn't the last time this will happen, Marek. We were only lucky to get here when we did."
"As you say."
Realizing he was still standing at attention, Jaina rolled her eyes and returned the salute. "Dismissed."
"Just following Imperial protocol, ma'am."
"Go before I Force-flick you on the forehead. Altamik tells me it's a good way to get you to listen."
"Going," Rahm said hastily, quickly leaving the room.
Alone, Jaina made her way over to her chair and sagged into it. Turning her head towards the viewport she watched the Galactic Alliance ships withdraw from orbit, and then leap into hyperspace. Releasing another breath of relief, she glanced to the holo of her boyfriend. "Hope your day is droll and boring Jag. Mine hasn't been, and it's far from over."
-)[-V-](-
Next stop was to another sector on the fringes of the Empire, where she actually had some Jedi work to do. From head of the Order of

Imperial Knights back to diplomat, Jaina had to don another hat to tend to the problems of the newly acquired, not entirely willingly, sector. The Ciutric Hegemony had been one of the many governments that had collapsed after the Tion Hegemony's civil war, with the economic strain of trying to rebuild further exacerbated by the sudden stop in the vital trade from their Outer Rim neighbor. Attempts to re-establish the government were hindered by Killik-sponsored pirate raids that the disorganized Ciutric military wasn't quite able to stop.

With the Killik threat over, however, it looked as if Ciutric was about to emerge from its dark times. But then the Empire decided to park several Star Destroyers over Ciutric IV, and declare the hegemony's space sovereign Imperial territory. Acting under the mandate Kenth Hamner had set up—where Outer Rim powers were responsible for the safety and stability of their surrounding territories—the Empire had seen fit to seize control of the region to protect the 'true Imperial patriots' who resided in Ciutric Hegemon space. With the Ciutric Navy in no condition to do anything, the Hegemony reluctantly voted to join the Empire once more.

And with Denon not really capable of doing anything more than admonish the 'Remnant' for its overly aggressive acquisition, it looked as if the annexation was going to stay in place.

Which really confused Jaina as to why ruling council of the Hegemony had called her out in the first place. Unlike some of the recently acquired fringe sectors, the Council of Moffs had immediately appointed a Moff to oversee the sector. Like Dantooine, a full garrison had been established, and the Holonet was flooded with pro-Imperial propaganda. Jaina couldn't exactly imagine what they'd need her for.

Stepping off of the shuttle onto the high landing platform of the capital building, Jaina was greeted to the usual fanfare—red and gold carpet, honor guard, brass band, ceremonial flyby of the local TIE garrison—and the local leaders standing at attention.

"Moff Alrik Krennel," Jaina greeted evenly. Middle-aged, Alrik Krennel was the son of Delak Krennel—one time admiral and co-ruler of the Hegemony after Palpatine's Empire had fallen.

"Jedi Solo…or is it colonel now?" Dark blond hair, piercing blue eyes, immaculately pressed Imperial uniform, the man could have been the poster-child of the humanocentric propaganda put out by Taspir.

"Either is fine, Moff Krennel."

"Please, call me Alrik. This is Davon, Minister of Finance, Nivva, Minister of Interior. Azak, Minister of Culture. Savat, Minister of inter-Hegemony Affairs."

"Your cabinet…it's very human," Jaina noted as they walked out of the sunlight and into the environmentally controlled halls of the capital building—one of many rebuilt since the Yuuzhan Vong war.
"Ahh, perhaps you've realized the core of why I've asked you to come."
Jaina inwardly grimaced. "Oh?"
"The Ciutric Hegemony is culturally, very much Imperial in nature. From the time of Palpatine himself, to the reign of my father, the Hegemony has been loyal to the doctrines on which the Empire was founded upon."
"Discipline, duty, order," Jaina rattled off, having seen the slogans enough on the many banners that the fringe sectors seem to be festooned with.
"Yes, quite. Therein lies the problem. To be Imperial is to be culturally pro-human, and on worlds such as Taspir and Dubrillion that is a simple task."
"The point, Moff Krennel, please. Your holo said that this need only be a short visit."
"To break it down, the Ciutric Hegemony had always had a slim human majority. But with the Yuuzhan Vong War and mass evacuation of many planets within the Hegemony, that is no longer the case. Humans now only comprise less than twenty-percent of the population."
"What would you have me do, Moff Krennel?"
"I would appreciate it greatly if you could issue a press-release, perhaps even a pre-recorded holo-message, supporting this government and reiterating our allegiance to the Empire. Perhaps highlight the benefits the Hegemony has enjoyed in the last month and a half under Imperial rule."
"And you can't have your own media-experts handle it?"
"I could, of course, but it will not have the same reassuring and supporting effect as you delivering the message. You are Jaina Solo, champion of the downtrodden, Jedi protector of the galaxy, Sword of the Jedi. Your word carries much more weight. I'd consider this a personal favor, Jedi Solo. Placate the masses so that the Empire may establish control over this sector in as peaceful and orderly a fashion as possible. The last thing you, Grand Moff Quille, or I would want is home-grown non-human terrorists mucking things up for the millions of others who have welcomed the Empire with open arms."
They stepped into his office, the other members of the cabinet returning to their duties. When the door closed behind him, Jaina took a moment to walk around the room, using it to buy time as she formulated a response. The room itself was not really helpful, showing

all the signs of an Imperial zealot who fully believed the propaganda he spewed. The Imperial crest, in gold and lantinum, was on one wall. A display case with models of various Imperial vessels sat against another. Books, actual paper books, and datacrystals containing Imperial works filled a bookshelf. Everything was in the dull grays, blues, and blacks the Imperial Navy favored.
Glancing at the now seated Moff, Jaina raised an eyebrow. "You would win their trust more if you had non-humans in the ruling council, your cabinet, your military."
"Ah, you are referring to what your boyfriend has done with those… things out in Chiss space," Moff Krennel chuckled. "Jedi Solo, forgive me for being blunt, but everyone knows that your boyfriend is living on borrowed time. It is only a matter of when, not if, the Grand Moff will concoct some excuse that will either remove him from power or get him executed. I cannot, in good conscience put Imperial arms in the hands of non-humans, nor give them the power to dictate Imperial policy. I am my father's son after all."
"And with all due respect, Moff Krennel. Your father did not last that long holding onto such beliefs," Jaina said evenly.
"Okay, let me put this another way, Jedi Solo. You are aware that my appointment to this position was near unanimous among the Council of Moffs?"
"I read up on it on the way here."
"Yes, well, my father whom you just mentioned, had many connections within the Imperial hierarchy, some very old. I am well aware that I received my position not through personal merit but because of these connections. Now, those connections can also work in reverse. There will come a time when you need the support of the Council of Moffs. I can guarantee you that if you do me this favor now, I can get the votes necessary to pass most any measure you would put before the council. That is a fair trade, no?"
"Moff Krennel, look at it from my perspective. You say my word has a lot of weight behind it, I believe you. But if I were to….what's the word you used, 'placate' your non-human population by assuring them that they'll be cared for, that everything will change for the better in the Hegemony, I better damn well mean what I'm saying. If I leave a message and things only get worse for the non-human population, the weight my words carry will mean a whole lot less. I can deliver the message you want, and then I will station a team of Imperial Knights in this sector to help ensure that things change for the better. If things don't go as I said they will, then I will ask Grand Moff Quille to personally remove you from your post. Because, like you, I also have

the ear of the Council of Moffs, and if you go back on what I say, we'll see who the council values more."
"Even then, will your influence be enough to save that alien-loving boyfriend of yours?" Krennel said evenly.
"Moff Fel is not part of this issue," Jaina replied just as coolly. "You want me to reassure your non-human population that you'll treat them fairly and equally when we both know that will be the furthest thing from the truth."
"My father learned the wonders of propaganda, Jedi Solo. You'll be surprised how much the masses will tolerate 'for the good of the Empire,' once they're onboard."
"Nevertheless, you want my help, accept a team of Imperial Knights. They're duty-bound to preserve the Empire's spirit and philosophies."
"Meaning?"
"Meaning, if you threaten the stability of the Empire by riling the non-humans out here, they are allowed by the Council of Moffs to remove you from power. That is my price, Moff Krennel."
"You are making a big mistake, Jedi Solo. The support I have on the Council of Moffs…"
"Is meaningless next to the fates of the millions of people you want me to deceive," Jaina called him out. "I trust in Moff Fel to cover his own political rear. Your help would have been a nice security blanket, but the cost would have been too high. You know my terms, Moff Krennel. I'd hate to leave this sector and learn that the non-humans are rising up against you because of your antiquated modes of thinking."
"And here I thought you were a student of politics."
"I am if the situation warrants it. But I figured you Moffs get enough of the double-talk and back-stabbing from each other. If you want, I can disguise my demands in veiled words while smiling and shaking your hand."
"That's quite all right," Moff Krennel said dourly. "If I accept your team of Imperial Knights…"
"Not my team, the Empire's. They act with the authority of the Council of Moffs and answer solely to the Grand Moff or myself."
"If I accept a team of Imperial Knights, you will consent to placating the unruly masses in this sector with a holo-message or two?"
"With words of my choosing, yes. I'll even do you one better and personally meet with any leadership the non-humans have to reassure them you are a different man than your father."
"And how long will the Imperial Knight team stay on?"
"As long as you're in power, Moff Krennel," Jaina said with a frosty smile. "Or until you've convinced me you truly had a change of heart."

"Fine. But know this, Solo. You've made an enemy out of me today."
"Get in line," Jaina said harshly. "If you thought you could just sweet-talk the young naïve me into happily doing your bidding, I'm the one who should be offended. And when that didn't work, you tried to bring in Jagged. You say I've made an enemy out of you today, Moff Krennel. Well, to be plain about it, I don't like you either."
"You just watch yourself," Krennel glared.
"Are you done blustering? I have your population to reassure, and then I have to move on to several other sectors and still be back at Taspir in time for the council meeting."
"My aides will show you to the media center."
"Thank you, long live the Empire," Jaina said snidely.
"Yes, may the Empire live long and strong," Moff Krennel said, his beady eyes glaring daggers.
Jaina exited his office , walked back towards the landing pad, and pulled out her comlink in the process. "Alexander, you there?"
There was a pause, and then the regional accents of Imperial Knight trainer Alexander Astin came back. "*Yup, need som'thing Colonel?*"
"How would your team like a crash course in how not to govern a majority when you're part of the minority?"
"*The Black Hearts are always eager to get some hands' on experience.*"
"Great, I'll owe you that autograph for your brother and then some."
"*Colonel,*" Alexander's voice became more serious. "*How far are we allowed to go to keep this territory a stable corner of the Empire*?"
"As far as the council said they would allow us," Jaina said in turn. "Millions of lives in this sector depend on it. Billions more depend on the stability of this sector. I'll leave it up to you."
"*Yes, ma'am.*"
"I'm on my way back to the ship for now. We'll probably stay in orbit for another dozen hours or so, so use that time to ready your team and get them acquainted with this place."
"*Understood, Astin out."*
Jaina slid into the pilot seat of the shuttle. "This is the *Starsaber* to Ciutric control. Please inform the Moff that I will return shortly. There are other matters that I must attend to first, but I will remain in-system if he does need to reach me."
"*Control copies, Starsaber. Thank you for agreeing to help out. Not sure if you've seen the local holo for the past few weeks but everything feels like an overcharged blaster. The last thing the Hegemony needs is for that blaster to blow up in our faces."*

"That's the last thing I want too, Control," Jaina said faintly. "Hopefully, cooler heads will win out. Any hint of unrest, of riots or subversion, and the Empire brings back its Star Destroyers and parks them in orbit again."
"*The Empire is lucky to have you, Jedi Solo. And the pattern is clear, you are clear to depart.*"
"Thank you," Jaina answered. "See you all in a bit." She shut off the comm and slouched in her pilot's chair as the autopilot took her back towards the *Rhysode*. "Because apparently I don't have anything better to do than to stop an uprising against the Empire before it can begin."
-)[-VI-](-
It was very late in the evening nearly a month laer when the *Rhysode* returned to orbit above Taspir Three's capital. Refraction from the layers upon layers of smog and clouds kept the industrial and city areas of the 'night' side of the planet awash in a glow of yellow and white. Nearly a month away and the planet still looked the same. Jaina supposed that was a good thing. No major catastrophe had occurred in her absence, no extra-galactic invaders, everything was just status quo.
"Receiving a hail from the *Bastion*." The comm-officer announced, referring to the star-dreadnaught that was Grand Moff Quille's personal command ship. One of the perks of absorbing so many sectors and their resources was that the Imperial Navy was as healthy as ever and now sported three newer model Super Star Destroyers.
Captain Avorn, with a nod from Jaina, replied. "Go ahead."
"*Colonel Solo, here for the meeting*?" Grand Moff Voster Quille said, a slight raise of his eyebrows. "*I would have thought that the fringe sectors would have kept your plate full.*"
"I learned to delegate," Jaina answered with a smile. "All three Imperial Knight teams are currently on assignment keeping the fringe sectors happy."
"*That's good, if the fringe is happy, then I am happy.*" The Grand Moff said humorously. "*I myself have just returned from supervising the construction of the latest Star Dreadnaught.*"
"And, how's it going?" Jaina asked in turn. She knew full well that this latest Star Dreadnaught was being constructed in the Chiss shipyards and would be used to patrol the Unknown Regions and Mid-Rim Wild Space.
"*The Chiss are nothing if not efficient. It is due to be completed a full month ahead of schedule.*"

"I'm not surprised. Moff Fel definitely knows how to motivate those under him," Jaina said.
"*Indeed*. *If you are going to attend the meeting, it will be aboard my ship. You are welcome aboard whenever you are ready to depart. You are among the first to arrive.*"
"Thank you Grand Moff Quille. When I finish up with things over here, I'll be on my way," Jaina said. The change of venue was no surprise. Taspir Three's Council of Moff meeting room had been built back during the days of the Remnant. Back when there were only ten Moffs—one for every sector the Remnant controlled. Now it was several times that many, with Moffs controlling governors in multiple sectors.
The call ended, and Jaina allowed a wry smile as she stared off at the massive triangle ship orbiting the planet. In a couple of minutes, the *Rhysode* would be completely engulfed by the *Super*-class cruiser's shadow. She had seen his election speeches made several years ago, and apparently he had been *very* serious about resurrecting the old Empire. During his tenure, the Remnant had grown in size exponentially, had gone from being a backwater ravaged by the Yuuzhan Vong War to a major Outer Rim power-broker. And now one of the main symbols of the old Imperial might was returning in dramatic fashion.
Jaina shook her head, still trying to recall just how she got to where she was in a—for all intents and purposes—resurrected Empire. She glanced down at her glossy black leather outfit, complete with mantle and cape and knee-high leather boots, something no self-respecting Jedi would be caught dead in. But when in the Empire…
"Ma'am?"
"I'm sorry?"
"Shall I have a shuttle standing by?"
"It's okay, Captain Avorn. I'll take care of the shuttle myself."
"Imperial protocol dictates that any representative at the Council of Moffs has at least two aides in attendance," the dark-skinned captain reminded politely. "Seeing as how you've dispatched Colonels Marek and Astin to different duties, might I suggest someone on the more imposing scale? This *is* the Order of Imperial Knights after all, and a certain image must be maintained."
"Is that Mandalorian, Gev, still onboard? I haven't seen her."
"She took off the moment her contract ended, something about family obligations and an auction on Phaeda. But she was not the one I had in mind."
He gestured for her to look behind, and she turned as bidden. The moment her eyes caught sight of the two the captain obviously had in

mind, her eyebrows shot up. Standing at attention were two tall, muscular, and bulky men in an outfit Jaina had not yet seen before. It was as if someone had taken the old Imperial Red Guard outfits, changed the color-scheme to a chrome-black, and made the eye-visor blood red. They both held a black, chrome Force-pike, and had a light-shoto hanging from their utility belt.
"General Dorja sent over the newly redesigned outfits for the elite of the Voidtroopers." Captain Avorn said, a pleased smile on his face let her know he enjoyed surprising her. "These two were chosen from the Imperial Navy by General Dorja herself. She guarantees that they can kill, or make very close to death, anyone who threatens you."
"They definitely make an impression," Jaina chuckled. "At ease, gentlemen. Mind taking off your helmets?"
"I can, ma'am," one of the two mountain-of-a-man removed his helmet to reveal a battle-scarred worn face of someone in his thirties-going-on-fifty. "Lieutenant Vorin, ma'am. But Lieutenant Bueler can't. He was on Borosk when the Vong threw asteroids at it. That suit's all that's keeping him alive."
"And yet General Dorja says you are among the elite of the Imperial Navy, very impressive Lieutenant Bueler."
"*It might help that I'm Force-aware too, ma'am*," the mechanically dry tone of the encased Imperial soldier replied. "*Too weak to make it into your Order, but it's served me well.*"
"You two ready to help me scare the Moffs into keeping us around?"
"We were told to follow your orders to the letter," Lieutenant Vorin replied.
"To the letter?" Jaina asked.
"Yes, ma'am. Unless it directly contradicts the well-being of the Empire."
"Well then." Jaina clapped her gloved hands together. "Let's go see what the Moffs have up their sleeves this time."

-)[-VII-](-

Jaina couldn't help but look smug as she took a seat at the long rectangular table set up in one of the *Bastion*'s hangar bays. She made a mental note to thank Captain Avorn as the other Moffs began to trickle in. Many were flanked by a pair of run-of-the-mill stormtroopers. Some chose to bring their 'chief of security' or other individual of obvious military bearing. And some still actually brought non-humans with them, though from the clothing Jaina could tell that the non-humans were in a servant role.
"Stop looking so smug," Jagged whispered, taking a seat next to her. He had brought with him Admiral Vitor Reige and his Imperial Knight

'bodyguard/minder' Antalia Draco. "Everyone can see you have the biggest friends."
"I love their double-takes though," Jaina whispered back. "And it's been three months since we've seen each other and that's the first thing you say?"
"Becoming amorous at a Grand Council of Moffs meeting is not recommended," Jagged muttered back.
"Point, hardly the mood-setting atmosphere either."
Eyebrows were raised when they saw another Chiss enter the room, flanked by a pair of Voidtroopers.
"Isn't that the head of the Mitth family?" Jaina muttered.
"He is," Jagged was equally at a loss to explain the man's presence. "Wonder what he's doing here."
The Chiss came over and sat opposite of Jagged at the table. "Moff Fel."
"Head of Family Mitth'roda'sari," Jagged acknowledged. "Your presence is a surprise."
"Grand Moff Quille invited me personally," the Chiss said, his voice containing the usual air of superiority all Chiss had when talking to non-Chiss.
They ended their exchange and turned back to the table as the last few Moffs, followed by Grand Moff Quille, arrived. The Grand Moff took his seat at the head of the table and glanced down the line, doing the same double-take everyone else had done when they saw the two large men standing behind Jaina's chair. Jaina met his eyes, and the slate-gray of Quille's reflected a cold amusement. As if acknowledging the fact that she could play politics despite her relatively young age.
"Thank you all for taking the time off what I am sure is your very busy schedules to meet here today," Quille began. "As you are no doubt aware by now, there are a lot of new faces at this meeting, some recognizable, others not so much. This relates to the first order of business. With the Swarm War behind us and the Empire growing by the month, I thought it best to re-organize from the top to ensure that we are not bogged down in the bureaucracy that has mired other governments. As such, the Moffs who formed the original council before the post-Vong War expansion will now be titled the 'High Council of Moffs.' Those of you who were elected or chosen during the expansion period will continue to have input in the running of this Empire, but it will be the High Council that will introduce and institute policy. The full council will meet tri-annually, or if the situation warrants it. Any Moff on this council, High or no, may call a full meeting."

"Are you saying that we will be answerable to the High Council, then?" One of the newer Moffs spoke up.
"That is correct," Quille said. "In front of you now are datapads which contain the details of this restructuring. Each of you will be answerable to one of the Moffs on the High Council, mostly based on the location of your sector or sectors or any economic ties you might have. And before you think the High Council has too much say in running this government, with the exception of my position, it will be you and your cohorts under said High Council Moffs that will choose his or her successor. This isn't a dictatorship after all. I will give you all a few minutes now to familiarize yourselves with this new protocol."
Like all the other Moffs at the table, Jaina picked up the datapad in front of her and browsed through the information. Her eyebrows rose slightly when she did not see Jagged's name anywhere on the list. Leaning over to her boyfriend, she said in a low voice. "Think he plans on offing you some time soon?"
"Soon would be inconvenient," Jagged muttered back. "I will have to ask him to schedule my dismissal or execution at a later date."
"Please do so, it would be inconvenient for me as well," Jaina whispered, slightly worried.
"Some of you might have realized that your names were left off the list, that is deliberate," Grand Moff Quille voiced, as if reading Jaina's mind. "Those keen enough to see the pattern will realize that the Moffs who do not have an immediate superior are those on the fringes of the Empire. For you seven, we cannot have bureaucracy endanger the snap-decisions that come with defending our borders. And because you are scattered from the Unknown Regions, through the Mid Rim, and Tion-ward, one set of standards will not work for all. Though you will not have a say in the policy decided at the core of the Empire, or be able to elect another High Council Moff, you will be able to administer to your regions as you see fit so long as they remain stable and secure. You are answerable only to the Grand Moff and your successors will be chosen by the High Council. If you want to form a council of your own, that is your prerogative. Other than that, the finer details are in the file of your datapad titled 'Fringe Defense'. "
Though not all the Moffs looked please at the restructuring, enough seemed satisfied enough that the transition looked to be a smooth one.
"If there are any further questions, address them to my office and I will attempt to reply in a timely manner," Grand Moff Quille finished. "Now then, the next order of business. Owing to our increased size and proportional increase in need of defending the Empire from enemies foreign and domestic, I propose we re-establish the Shadow Initiative.

Though the Order of Imperial Knights has performed admirably thus far, there are still too few Force-sensitive beings capable of becoming a Knight to be found within our territory. Rather than emulate the Galactic Alliance and entice Force-users outside our boundaries, I propose we create our own. Possibly even enhance our current regiments of Voidtroopers."

Jaina, who had only been half paying attention during the previous order of business, looked up sharply at the Moff.

"Do you have something to say, Colonel Solo?" Grand Moff Quille asked lightly.

"If I recall correctly, Grand Moff, the Shadowtroopers of old were given their powers by the Valley of the Jedi. How are we going to augment non-Force users without that sort of fount of Force power? Not to mention the unique crystals needed to maintain the stability of said augmentation."

"For your latter concern, Colonel, you'll be pleased to know that the Empire has obtained regional control of the Kwymar sector to maintain the security of the Galactic Alliance mining operations in the distant Outer Rim sector. We have full access to Artus Prime and the Artusian crystals they produce. In fact, the first shipment of tribute is schedule to be delivered to the *Rhysode* in a fortnight. Additionally, our scientists have confirmed that crystal shards from the ruined world of Borosk also have the same properties as lightsaber and Artusian crystals."

"That's one problem solved."

Quille smiled almost ferally. "As for your first concern. Our trade with the Tion Hegemony has allowed our scout vessels access to their space. One such system scouted by Lord Argor, is said to be, let me see if I remember his words correctly, 'teeming with the deaths of thousands and strong in the Force'."

"What system would that be?" Jaina frowned. "From the description, it sounds almost like a darker version of the Valley of the Jedi."

The Grand Moff picked up a datapad. "It is the Malachor system, Colonel. An ancient battle ground where historians say many hundreds of Force-users perished. Even after millennia, Lord Argor says that the region is as strong as ever in the Force."

"Dark side of the Force from the sounds of it," Jaina commented. "You send our people there, they're just as likely to go mad."

"But those that don't will be stronger for it," Moff Krennel voiced. "An elite group of stormtroopers, capable of using the Force and hardened by the forges of Malachor. I see no better force to protect the Empire."

"Do not fret, Colonel. As these soldiers will be Force-sensitive, they will be part of the Order of Imperial Knights. No use augmenting our elite and not teaching them how to use their new gifts now, is there?"
"If it allays some of your concern," Moff Lecersen said. "Colonel Altamik supports this plan."
"She does?" Jaina didn't have to fake her surprise.
"Quite," another Moff agreed. "She said that you might need some convincing, but that we shouldn't turn away a possible avenue to boost the numbers of Force-users under our command."
"Did she?" Jaina mentally sent Turi the 'evil eye' as she struggled to keep her face impassive. "Well she was correct on both counts. I am not entirely convinced that augmenting Voidtroopers is the way to go, especially since the Empire's previous armies of artificial Force-sensitive soldiers were all routed by a single Jedi."
"These augmented soldiers will be akin to an Imperial Knight commando squad," another 'High' Moff, Moff Rosset said. "If we do have Jedi problems, it will be your Imperial Knights who get the call. You *do* have confidence in *their* abilities, correct?"
"Of course," Jaina sighed. She knew from the looks of superiority the Moffs were wearing that the issue had more or less been decided already. "So if the Grand Moff's proposal passes, how will this work?"
Pleased to get back on topic, Quille nodded. "We would select the best men and women in the Empire, and among your Voidtrooper classes. Then, using techniques utilized in the creation of the first Shadowtroopers, we would augment them and station them on the *Rhysode* until they are needed."
"Just like that?" Jaina said mildly. She inwardly knew that stationing the new Shadowtroopers on the *Rhysode* would discourage any would-be Jedi saboteurs from blowing them up outright. It was well known that the *Rhysode* contained families and children, and no matter how desperate someone might be to stop this new initiative, they probably wouldn't stoop to blowing away said families to get the job done. Jedi just didn't work like that.
"Just like that," Quille said. "Any command hierarchy is up to you. And you, of course, will still be answerable to General Dorja and the now High Council."
"It sounds almost too good to be true," Jaina said flatly.
"There's no catch. This is all for the good of the Empire," Quille replied patiently.
"Then we might as well take a vote. A few extra bodies would definitely help lighten the load on the young Knights we've been training," Jaina relented.

"Excellent."
Quille's motion passed in an overwhelming majority, and even Jaina had to admit that she could see the benefits of it. She could also just as easily see the reaction such an initiative was going to cause back on Denon. Those were going to be some not so fun calls she was going to field. Maybe she'd pass them on to Altamik.
The meeting continued on, with garrison deployments, fleet maneuvers, and trade highlighting the day. It wasn't until the very end, that things got interesting for Jaina once more.
"And now for the last order of business. As you might be aware, Moff Fel was elected to his post in a highly unorthodox manner in highly unusual times. I do not wish to set a precedent by saying that Moff Fel was legitimately elevated to his position when the creation of his post violated Imperial charter and bylines. What I propose now is to remove Moff Fel from office and to put the election of the Moff of the Chiss sector to a vote. The Empire is all about regulations, and it does not reflect well on us to have him in a position of high office in a manner that flouts those regulations. In place of Moff Fel, I would like to nominate the nephew of Grand Admiral Thrawn, Head of Family Mitth'roda'sari. Though non-human, his connections to the people of the Chiss sector will help keep order during the transition."
"I move to second that proposal," Moff Krennel voiced almost immediately.
"Before we vote on the issue, I believe Moff Fel has a right to speak in his defense," Moff Lecersen spoke, the bobbing of heads from other Moffs who's sectors abutted Jagged's indicated support for the comment.
A slight annoyed tic appeared on Quiile's face, but vanished just as quickly. "Very well, Moff Fel?"
Jagged, apparently having expected what was happening, calmly stood, looking very professional in his pressed, white military dress uniform. "Thank you for the opportunity, Grand Moff. I will keep things brief. I currently have the support of the entire Chiss sector military, the entire Vagaari Empire military, and the several hundred million non-humans who were shipped in from other sectors. We are currently monitoring three different races in the Unknown Regions who could become a threat to the Empire, as well as hunting down the remnants of the Killik invasion force. We have met or exceeded every quota placed on our sector, full details of the Chiss sector's economy are being sent to your personal datapads now. Keep in mind that humans account for less than five-percent of the total population in my sector. As the Grand Moff stated earlier, one set of standards will not work for

all. In my case, each system within my territory requires a different touch. As seasoned a politician as Mitth'roda'sari may be, and despite the fact that he is Chiss, the Mitth family are distrusted by the rest of the Chiss due to his uncle's failures. Furthermore, Chiss are ingrained to value their own family first, their own species first. With all the other families, all the other species that now reside in the sector, should this lack of respect for Dasari create a schism, you will then have a non-human Moff in charge of a sector that is a hairsbreadth away from imploding. That is all."

Grand Moff Quille looked as if he had just eaten an unripe lemon. But again quickly schooled his features as Jagged resumed his seat. "As you said, Moff Fel. All in favor of putting the matter to a vote?"

Jaina didn't realize she was holding her breath until Jagged leaned in towards her and whispered. "Breathe, he won't get the votes to even put the matter to a vote."

Exhaling almost in surprise, Jaina's eyes darted back to her boyfriend. "What?"

Jagged replied by closing his eyes and raising a single eyebrow. She took the offer and skimmed his surface thoughts. *Quite a bit of you has rubbed off on me, Jaina Solo. I am not entirely helpless in the political realm.*

Jaina did her best to keep from smiling, glancing again to Grand Moff Quille as he looked at the votes coming in. She tried to get a read on the man, but he was like a sheet of durasteel. No emotions were escaping him, not even a hint of frustration or glee. So she instead turned her gaze to the other Moffs. Moffs Bhao and Rezzer were almost malicious in their voting, their emotions running in a similar pattern as Moff Krennel and several others. But there were others still who appeared to take delight in knowing that their vote would cause grief to particular people, faces in anger or distress passing through their minds. Jaina exhaled slowly, hoping that her boyfriend was as good in the political realm as he was in a fighter's cockpit.

After several long seconds, Voster Quille calmly put his own datapad down. "Motion fails to carry. Moff Fel may keep his office until such time another election takes place."

"Thank you."

This time Jaina heard the tiniest bit of gloating in Jagged's voice despite the monotone delivery.

"Congratulations, Moff Fel," Mitth'roda'sari said without emotion. "You do know that this is just the start of things."

"Of that, I have no doubt, Head of Family," Jagged acknowledged.

"With that, this meeting has come to a close," Grand Moff Quille announced. "You may return to your sectors and continue to strengthen our glorious Third Imperium. Long live the Empire."
Jaina, feeling slightly giddy that Jagged had avoided the vote on his job altogether, couldn't help but respond with the other Moffs. "Long live the Empire."
After all, through some twist of fate, the Empire was now home.
-)[-Chapter End-](-

Jacen
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"Are you certain you want to do it?" Kam Solusar of the Jedi High Council asked.
"I am," Jacen confirmed. It had been a little over a month since he had returned from the front lines, a mere week since his sojourn on Hapes. As the Jedi Order's current Senate representative, he had had to get caught up on the many happenings that had gone on not only while he was in the Unknown Regions, but on Hapes as well. Now he was standing before the ruling council of the Jedi Order, once again throwing himself head first into the political quagmire of the Galactic Alliance. "With the elections to replace the senators killed in the war coming up, I respectfully ask this council to allow me to run for a third term as the Jedi Order's senate representative."
"It's not that simple, Master Solo," Barratk'l said in his baritone. His voice carried neither approval or disproval.
"It isn't?" Jacen was taken aback by the statement.
Luke Skywalker tilted his head in acknowledgment. "Unlike your previous uncontested runs, you would be the third candidate vying for the job should the council accept it."
"Third?" Jacen did his best to conceal his surprise. This was the first time anyone had actually shown interest in the position. In fact, he had even ran for a second term because no one else wanted the job.
"Yes, Master Waxarn Kel of the Yavin Four Praxeum and our own Jedi Master Tresina Lobi of Denon."
Jacen absorbed the information impassively. Waxarn was very similar to Anakin in terms of political thinking, not that the Death Knight leader would ever admit it. Tresina Lobi, on the other hand, was a firm supporter of Kenth Hamner and his plans to further integrate the Jedi Order into the government. There couldn't be two candidates further from each other policy-wise.
"I would be the middle ground then," Jacen said, bowing his head respectfully at Tresina. "Now that the Grandmaster has been selected

and the Jedi are returning from the field, they should have a wide range of views to choose from."
"The new senate representative from the Jedi Order would have to adapt to the changing times. You won't just be debating policy and advancing the Order's interest in the Senate forum," Kyle Katarn said, his hands folded in front of him as he leaned forward. "The senate and the Jedi Order itself is no longer what it was when you were last here. With Dathomir and Corellia's praxeums declaring themselves independent from the decisions made by the council, you'd also have to work with their representatives to ensure that what they are doing is in line with the overall idea of what it means to be a Jedi."
"You are already a member of this council," Luke Skywalker said evenly. "And you have done much in your previous terms despite the duties of both this council and the senate. Should you not let another take your place? Someone who can devote his or her full attention to the position?"
"There is also one other thing," Kam Solusar said. "As head of the Galactic Alliance Guard, your brother has also been given some say as to the workings of the Jedi Order thanks to the Chief of State. Should you be elected the Jedi Order's senate representative, you will likely be working alongside each other to ensure the best for the Jedi Order."
"That's great," Jacen said genuinely. "After spending all that time on Zonama, it'll be nice to actually work with my brother for once."
"You haven't won the elections yet," Tresina said with an amused smile.
"True," Jacen chuckled. "But as for your concerns, Master Skywalker. I think that after two terms, I've learned my limits as to what I can and cannot do. Balancing the role of High Council member and Senate representative has become almost second nature to me."
"Might I ask a personal question," Barratk'l asked.
"You can," Jacen nodded.
"If you were to be elected senator, what of your daughter and the Queen Mother of Hapes?"
"They will be fine without me," Jacen said smoothly. "I've already come to an agreement with Her Majesty, and we have both decided that this is for the best."
"Will you be okay working with your brother?" Kyle asked. "The two of you are on record as having many philosophical and moral differences."
"We should be fine," Jacen nodded. "When it comes down to it, we both want the best for this galaxy, for the Jedi Order. We can put our

differences aside if we truly disagree on something or if something needs to be done."
"We should put a term-limit on the position after this," Tresina spoke up. "One person shaping policy for over a decade will have lasting effects."
"You speak as though you've already lost, Master Lobi," Jacen commented.
Tresina smiled back. "Merely commenting on how the Jedi Senatorial position was established back during the Yuuzhan Vong War with the barest of guidelines. The times *have* changed greatly since then."
"True enough. Well, do I have this council's permission to run for a third term?"
"Provisionally, yes," Luke said, after taking a visual count of the nods. "Many of the Jedi Order are still spread out mopping up the last issues caused by the Killiks. The election for the Jedi Senate representative won't be for several months at the earliest."
"It'll give me time to get caught up on the happenings in Denon then," Jacen said. "I know how much a year's difference can make."
"You'll forgive me if I don't wish you luck," Tresina said with a smile.
"Likewise, Master Lobi," Jacen returned the grin. "In several months we'll find out just which direction the Jedi Order wants to go."

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The door to his Denon apartment slid shut behind him with an almost inaudible hiss. Jacen shrugged off his outer robe and hung it on a hook by the door. It was part of the routine he had gotten into ever since returning to Denon. He lived and breathed politics in the day, and when he was done, he returned to the four-roomed apartment that sat a few blocks away from the Senate Building. It wasn't a home, it was merely a place to sleep, and occasionally eat. When Seha and Nelani had visited him a week earlier, they had chided him on his lack of any furniture other than a mattress and reading lamp. He didn't even have a dining table or desk, or any chairs or couches. The two teenage girls had left promising that they'd return with something to 'liven up' the place. They had yet to return and he wasn't sure if it was a good or bad thing that it was taking them this long to accomplish their goal.
He poured himself a glass of water and glanced into his almost always empty refrigerator. He had some left over salad from a carry-out place down the block, so he took that out and absently carried it over to the bay window that looked out over the Senate Plaza. The evening rush-hour speeder traffic was in full swing, the almost immobile lines of speeders and other craft filling the air in a lattice work of machine and lights against the ever-dimming sky. And, as was his almost nightly

ritual, Jacen turned his gaze up to the faint stars, not yet drowned out by Denon's ever-present light-pollution. The cold emptiness of his apartment left him feeling slightly disturbed, even more so now that he had that month on Hapes to compare his experiences to. But as quick as his thoughts of family came, he banished them. He couldn't afford to have those feelings, couldn't afford to make the very mistakes Vergere had warned him about. The minute, no, the very second, he started contemplating a possible life on Hapes, he was ignoring the turbulent present and the many threats that would grow if left unchecked.

Quicker than he realized, he had finished his salad and water. Depositing the container the salad had come in with an over-the-shoulder toss into the wastebasket, Jacen activated the privacy screen and the view outside was replaced with slate-gray walls. Normally, he'd then sit on his mattress, back against the wall, and review the various reports that had accumulated over the day. But today the solitary silence of the apartment reminded him a bit too much of the absence of his daughter's giggles and the warmth of Tenel Ka's embrace. It didn't help that he once again caught his reflection on the bathroom mirror—the cybernetics covering his missing right side of his jaw glowing in the dim lighting of his apartment—and was reminded of just how much had changed.

He pulled on his outer robe again and decided to take a walk. He would need his head clear if he was serious about running for a third term. The state of the Jedi Order was one of extreme confusion. Even with Luke Skywalker returning to the role as Grandmaster, Anakin taking most of the younger generation of Jedi to war had polarized a good portion of the Order. The older Jedi could see that the younger generation had been thoroughly traumatized by the fighting, could see that the Jedi who did survive looked to Anakin for direction more than the High Council. Even the older Jedi were not united in thought, with many siding with Luke and wanting to separate the Jedi Order from the political center of the Galactic Alliance, and others wanting the Jedi to do more in the Galactic Alliance.

Jacen would admit it to anyone who asked, his uncle wasn't exactly what one would call a 'strong' leader. Between his family, his philosophical beliefs, and his inability to adapt quick enough to the change in times, Luke Skywalker had left the Jedi Order floundering for direction. And whether Jacen liked it or not, Anakin was providing it in spades as the Director of the Galactic Alliance Guard. Already, the remaining Death Knights had jumped onto the bandwagon, becoming the first Jedi to actually leave the Order and work in a purely political

and military institution within the Galactic Alliance. The poodoo storm *that* raised was only amplified when several other Jedi operating on the fringe of the Order followed suit. Having an entire Praxeum break away was one thing, at least the Corellian and Dathomiri institutions still followed the teachings of the Jedi Orders of past. But having individual Jedi voluntarily ex-communicate themselves and join what many media outlets were calling a 'secret police force' was an entirely different thing all together.

To say that Anakin wasn't earning any friends within the established portion of the Jedi Order was a vast understatement. Yet, because Anakin was operating as a proxy of the office of the Chief of State, and because the public was currently lauding him as the hero of the Swarm War, the Jedi Order could do little but issue terse condemnations of his actions.

And if Jacen Solo was elected to the third term, he'd have to work with his brother and all the politics that entailed. He understood what his brother was doing, saw the long-term goal Anakin was trying to reach. But at the same time, what Anakin was doing wasn't necessarily good for the Jedi Order in the short-term. The Jedi Order had already been greatly weakened by the Yuuzhan Vong War and following instability. With the split of the Praxeums during the lead up to the Swarm War, the Jedi Order's ability to tend the galactic affairs diminished even further. Despite this, the Jedi Order's political clout remained just as powerful as ever thanks to Hamner being elected to the head office. In short, the Jedi were making many promises, but were wholly incapable of following through on even a fraction of them. The younger generation saw this with the unfolding of the Swarm War and the decimation of their ranks, the older generation fell back to their 'trust in the Force' and platitudes about patience and working with the local governments.

All in all, the Jedi Order desperately needed someone to say 'this is what we're going to do,' and actually follow through on that.

And Jacen intended to be that person.

Walking along the holo-sign lit streets with the golden evening sunlight streaming through the highrises, Jacen didn't have any particular direction in mind. He barely registered the constant chatter of the people on the packed walkways, the honking and zooming of the speeders above. His mind was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't realize how far he had walked until he felt something in the Force.

Looking around in surprise, Jacen found himself stepping off a lift-platform and onto one of Denon's lower levels. Here, the dying light of

the sun barely filtered through the towering highrises, so much of the debris and oil-coated walkways were illuminated by flickering lights and dirtied lamps. There were no holo-signs, with the companies on high knowing that those so far down the social-economic rung couldn't afford their products and didn't even bother trying to advertise to them.

Saying that the walkways were less crowded than the ones higher up was like comparing the weight of a Hutt and a womprat and saying the womprat was only 'a little lighter'. The walkways were practically devoid of any sign of life outside the occasional beggar or street gang hanging at a corner. He felt the disturbance in the Force and let his instincts guide him around the twisting and grimy pathways. As he got closer to the source, he could hear outraged voices and calls of agreement.

"We wouldn't be in this situation if you Jedi hadn't gotten involved!"

"Yeah!"

"What good are these blankets and food packs now? We have no home! We get preyed upon by the street gangs the moments you Jedi retire to that nice cozy temple of yours! What do you know about living in the streets!"

"All the Jedi Order thinks they have to do is send us a few kids and a box of supplies and it makes everything better?! They were able to send an entire fleet to the Outer Rim to battle bugs, yet they can't do a thing down here!"

The absolutely hostile atmosphere continued to grow with every angry cry and roar of agreement. Rounding the corner, Jacen found himself in a larger intersection that connected his pathway to dozens of others like a star. At the center of the star were several of the Denon Temple students, all trying to placate a very angry and unruly mob of destitute and downtrodden.

With his Force-enhanced hearing, Jacen could hear both the yells and whispers filtering through the crowd.

"We can only give you the tools to help make your life better, please. The rest is up to you," the Zeltron quasi-Force sensitive apprentice Rali Xici, better known to her friends as Raxi, held out her hands. "Please, accept it in the manner in which we mean it. Citizens from all over the galaxy donated these goods for you all."

"Go home!" An angry voice yelled in turn, hurling an old boot at the teenage girl.

"Hey! That was uncalled for," Siare Amah snapped back, pointing a finger in the general direction of the thrower. "Look, if you all don't want any of the food goods for your families and friends, that's fine.

We'll just pack up and take them to people who actually appreciate what we're trying to do. I'm blind, not stupid, but even I can see you'd rather eat whatever scraps you've been scrounging up than the goods we have. Come on…"
"Siare," Raxi chided gently. "It's okay."
"It's not okay. We worked hours trying to get the committees and various politicians to get these goods. If these self-serving…"
"They need an outlet, Siare," Raxi said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Would you rather they go home with this anger and take it out on their families?"
"We're Jedi, not the galaxy's punching bags," Siare countered. "It's only gotten worse since Anakin Solo returned. Before they were happy with the goods we could get them. Now, now these people expect miracles, expect us to move them into cushy apartments and cater to their every need."
The unruly crowd continued to glare and grumble at the trio of teenagers standing in the middle of the walkway intersection. Things escalated when someone in the front of the crowd pulled out a battered blaster.
"I'll make it easy for you kids. You leave your stuff here and skedaddle back to the temple, and we won't send the Jedi Order a message that they're failing the people they're supposed to be serving."
"That's not necessary," the third member of the trio, Seha Dorvald said calmly. Her red hair was tucked away in a bandanna as the fifteen-year old Jedi offloaded another crate from the speeder the Jedi had come in. "Please, put the blaster way."
The man responded by discharging the blaster, the red beam slicing through the air and scorching the back of the speeder by Seha's head. "Not going to say it again. Put the stuff down and get going. We don't want your kind here. You Jedi bring nothing but sorrow and misery wherever you go."
"Okay, we're going," Seha said patiently.
"Seha," Siare protested.
"We can always get more, they cannot," Seha said, shaking her head.
Jacen stayed silent, using the Force to keep him out of sight from both the crowd and the young Jedi in the middle of them. By the second, the unrest built, the young Jedi sensing it and looking to one and other uneasily.
"Just leave the supplies," Raxi said.
"So they can be hoarded by the street gangs that run this place and the used to extort the others?" Siare shook his head. "I don't think so."
"So you want to fight an angry mob then?"

"We can just use the Force and send them back home," Siare hissed back, a brief use of echolocation letting him know the crowd was slowly closing in.
"Then they'd still be angry, cold, and hungry and fearful of what the future has in store," Raxi argued. "Seha?"
Seha bit her lip. "We have to cut our losses, Siare. At least if we leave the goods, some people in this region will benefit."
"The ones that don't deserve to," Siare said, shaking his head. "I'd rather give the goods to those who will actually be grateful for them, for what we're trying to do. I'm not down here for my health and happiness and I sure as Sith don't need these dumbdumbs trying to rob us."
"Time's up, Jedi!"
Siare stepped in front of both his female friends, his white and gold-embroidered Mirulukan veil definitely out of place in the dingy blacks, grays, and browns of the surrounding area. He had grown taller since Jacen had last saw him, had obviously been working out too. "Yeah, we're not going to just let you bully your way to these supplies. Sorry about that. Go home, and when your families ask where the food is, remember that you were being as smart as a Gundark's backside with the guys who actually wanted to help you. We're leaving, *with* the supplies."
The blaster fired again, but Siare jerked his head to the side and the bolt missed. In three quick steps he was standing mere centimeters away from the shooter. He slammed his hand out, catching the man in the solar plexus and dropping him like a sack of dirt. One of the man's buddies tried to grab him, but Siare twisted out of the way, catching the outstretched hand and promptly dislocating the man's arm. The man's cry of pain stunned the already shocked onlookers, unable to believe that a Jedi was actually attacking them.
Siare flipped the man onto his back and gave him a kick to the head for good measure, knocking him out. The crowd around him promptly took several steps back.
"Good," Siare said with a biting tone, his voice doing the glare his sightless eyes were incapable of doing. "Now, do you all want to start all over and actually be grateful we're trying to help your unfortunate rears by accepting our aid? Or do you want to be jerks about it and watch us fly away and give these goods to others?"
The crowd seemed frozen in place, half of them glancing at the Jedi and the others at the two downed men.
"I guess they don't want any aid, Seha, Raxi, let's get going."

"Wait!" One of the others in the crowd said, pushing his way forward. "We'll take the aid! Please! My family can't eat for another day if you leave now! Forget these others!"
"I need the medicines!" Another cried out, scrambling past the previously enraged protesters.
"Then get up here," Siare said, both Seha and Raxi looking at the normally cheery Force-sensitive in shock. "And then get lost."
Some of those who had been protesting only moments earlier appeared to swallow their pride and approach the Jedi with outstretched hands. Others timidly accepted the goods being provided and then backed away from the trio of teens as fast as they could. The two men who had been attacked by Siare and limped away, the terror on their faces masked with embarrassed anger.
"By the way, you two," Siare said sharply, pausing the two in their tracks. "If you, any of your friends, or any friends of friends harass or bother these others for accepting our goods, you won't like the consequences."
After another hour, the goods were all distributed, and the crowd dispersed.
Raxi promptly slapped Siare.
"Ouch! What the kriff Raxi!"
"You know what for!" The Zeltron snapped. "Jedi do not threaten, do not escalate matters, and certainly do not attack…"
"When you see a Jedi let me know, Raxi. We're glorified delivery drivers," Siare said sharply, tossing an empty crate back into the speeder. "We've been at this for what, almost two years now? There's never any end to it, always people hungry, sick, suffering, no matter how many boxes of goods we give way. We can pat ourselves on the back all we want, but we're not making anything better in the long-term. The big-wigs on the High Council sure don't give a damn about the people down here. Heck, they've sent nearly everyone in the Denon Temple on missions all across the galaxy and left us Force-rejects with the rejects of society."
"We can't save…"
"Don't give me that line, Seha," Siare spun on the red-haired teen. "If we can't save these people, why are we prolonging their misery? We're only doing this so the Jedi Order can say 'look, see, we're helping the defenseless.' Never mind that the street gangs in this region will move back in the moment we leave. That there are probably thousands of others in this building network who were too afraid to leave their houses to get here. We can't save everyone, but I doubt a single member of the High Council has even set foot below the mid-city. How

can they even hope to save anyone if they're blind to the people on their very doorstep!"
"That doesn't justify attacking those men!"
"We got the job done, the aid out to the many needy instead of the powerful few," Siare snapped back.
"You can't keep blaming yourself for that run a month ago," Raxi's expression softened. "We had no way of knowing…"
"That a gang's death squad would go door-to-door killing everyone we gave aid to? That because Anakin Solo launched an attack on the Killiks in the undercity, those millions of refugees would come up here and make the matter worse for the millions of others already at the lowest rung on the ladder? Things are getting worse every day, Raxi, we see it firsthand! The gangs, the poverty, the suffering, it's not going away no matter how many aid runs we make. And the best part is, the vaunted High Council can't do poodoo about it. Sometimes I wonder why I even stay at the Denon Temple anymore."
Complete silence answered Siare's rant, with Seha uncomfortably stacking the last of the empty crates and Raxi standing in front of Siare with an arm hugging herself.
"What?" Siare shifted self-consciously.
"You want to leave, go," Raxi practically whispered, watery purple eyes looking away.
"I didn't say that," Siare said quickly, reaching out and taking one of her hands. "It's just…look, we're trying to escape an avalanche with a crippled Tauntaun. If we keep at this, we're going to go under. The higher ups all have priorities that don't include the millions down here, so why be their token feel-good peons?"
"Because these people are hurting and need help," Raxi said softly. "Many of them just try to survive on the barest of essentials, never asking for more than they have. At the core of it, a Jedi is supposed to help that good grow. Nurture that flickering light so that it doesn't go out. If we stop caring for them, if we start thinking like the idiot Solos, Skywalkers, Katarns, and other guys on the High Council who only care about the big picture, then who will? It may seem like a hopeless task to you, devoid of fun and accolades and victory parades and speeches, but at least we can say we're doing something no Jedi Master or Knight would spend time doing. I remember all the lectures and lessons, somewhere along the way the Jedi Order forgot what it was meant to be for. Somewhere along the way, the Solos and Skywalkers of the galaxy high-jacked its purpose, turned the others into soldiers, politicians, and people who couldn't afford to spend time on the 'inconsequential beings' of the galaxy. But that's okay, because as long

as I do this, it doesn't matter if I can barely use the Force or not. I'm being more Jedi than they can ever hope to be."
Silently, Jacen withdrew. Raxi and Siare's words played back loudly in his mind, their points similar to many Nelani had made during their many talks in the Swarm War. And looking back on those words, he had to admit that the Jedi had definitely lost their way. If the Solos were supposed to be the exemplar of a Jedi, then they weren't setting very good examples. Jaina had more or less abandoned the Order to be with her boyfriend and play politics in the Remnant. Anakin had gone the hermit route, then decided to become the head of a secret security force and recruit ex-communicated Jedi. And he, he had buried himself in politics on Denon or over on Hapes, hardly the guiding light of the Jedi Order.
Things definitely needed to change. And thanks to three teenagers who could barely use the Force, he now knew where to begin.
0-o-III-o-0
Things seemed to only get worse between his brother and the Jedi Order. Chief of State Kenth Hamner was leading the GA government in one direction, and Grandmaster Skywalker was leading the Jedi Order in another, and Anakin was caught between the two. The tension between both entities was such that the animosity within the High Council of the Galactic Alliance was obvious to anyone who watched. It wasn't just Anakin flouting Jedi Order agenda, but he was being so convincing in his arguments that he often won the votes of a Jedi Master or two, effectively negating what the Jedi Order had been trying to do. Jedi continued to leave the Order and join the Galactic Alliance Guard—which had become a very sore point of contention between the GAG and the Jedi Order now that nearly two dozen Jedi had signed up. Yet, the Jedi Order could hardly ban their people from making the switch. In retaliation, however, the GAG began to receive less and less official Jedi support or public sanctions of their actions. The Jedi Order wanted to make it clear to the public that the GAG did *not* represent the values the Jedi Order tried to uphold.
At issue now was another divided council, and for once, Anakin had nothing to do with it. It didn't stop the problem, however, from somehow ending up in his lap.
"The fact remains, Raiobollo sector is now a part of the Third Imperium," Jedi Master Barratk'l said in his rumbling baritone. "We might have identified those eleven families several months ago, but they are now citizens of the Empire."

"When they were identified by the Jedi Order, Dantooine was firmly a member of the Galactic Alliance," Intelligence Director Belinidi Kalenda pointed out.
The Justice Minister made a sound of agreement. "Furthermore, the Galactic Alliance charter states that all Force-sensitive individuals be given to the Jedi Order to train. The Order of Imperial Knights has never been acknowledged as a legitimate training institution for Jedi, nor has the GA recognized the unilateral declaration by the Third Imperium that claims any Force sensitives in their space."
"If we attempt to take those families, we'd be violating the sovereignty of the Third Imperium," Luke Skywalker said coolly. "If they truly wished it, the Force-sensitive individuals can personally appeal to the Jedi Order and we can bargain with the Third Imperium."
"Damn it, Grandmaster," Kyle pounded his arm-rest. "With all due respect, we can't be passive about this. Since the end of the Swarm War, our praxeums have recruited a grand total of eleven individuals. That's eleven individuals from throughout the thousands of systems in GA space in over a hundred days. In that same time, we've lost two apprentices and a Jedi Knight to continuing conflicts all over the galaxy. Our praxeums are practically empty, and even if we identify new recruits, it takes us forever to free up someone from their duties to actually retrieve them. Heck, I'm on this council and I had to recruit half of those eleven kids because everyone else was busy."
"He has a point, uncle," Jacen spoke up. "The Galactic Alliance continues to lean on the Jedi Order to solve their hardest problems, but we're beyond stretched thin. If we let the Imperials have these potential students without a peep on our end, that's going to set a precedent."
"What will stop other planets from setting up their own institutions and keeping their Force-sensitives to themselves?" Tresina Lobi agreed.
"We risk a war with the Third Imperium," Kam Solusar argued back.
"Please, they won't go to war over eleven families," Kenth Hamner shook his head.
"The Jedi Order will *not* force these families from Dantooine. Not when they're officially Imperial citizens now," Luke Skywalker said firmly.
"That's okay Master Skywalker," Kenth Hamner looked to the man sitting on his right. "Director Solo, I want you to dispatch the *Tython* and a few of your Jedi to pick up the students. Master Lobi, if you can take the *Unyielding Light*, I'll have Admiral Makin dispatch a small taskforce to back the *Tython* up in case the Imperials decide to play hardball."

"The Imperials might have already collected the families by then," Octa Ramis mentioned.
Belindi, however, shook her head. "My sources in the Third Imperium say that Jaina Solo isn't scheduled to pick them up for another two or so weeks. That should leave our people plenty of time to get in and extract the families. I'm sure that Director Solo's people will be more than up to that task."
All the eyes in the room darted to Anakin, who had otherwise been silent throughout the entire discussion. Jacen saw his brother hide a faint smile as he met Kenth Hamner's gaze. "Chief of State, what are the orders you wish me to pass to the members of the *Tython*?"
Kenth blinked for a moment. "To retrieve the Force-sensitive individuals and return them to a Jedi Order-controlled Praxeum."
"And if the Third Imperium protests, are my people still to forcibly remove the Force-sensitive individuals?"
"They'll have a small fleet group backing them up," Kenth nodded.
Anakin tilted his head in deference. "Understood. Given that we're on a time limit, I should probably handle this now. Excuse me ministers, masters."
Anakin gave both groups small bows and then left the room.
Jacen felt the ire from several of the Jedi Masters spike before they could control it.
"I'm doing what's best for the Jedi Order," Kenth Hamner said evenly. "Your Order needs recruits, and we won't get them if others continue to poach them."
"What of the Galactic Alliance?" Luke said. "The Third Imperium is a cornerstone of the government. It would be unwise to anger them over eleven families."
"The Third Imperium's economy is also heavily tied into the rest of this government," Kenth Hamner countered. "If they were to secede, they'd cripple themselves. Especially since they're fast outpacing the resources at their disposal."
As the argument continued, Jacen likewise excused himself from the meeting. He was supposed to attend another committee that was deciding the allocation of funds to various Jedi Order-sponsored projects. Supposed to being the key words.
Walking through the vast hallways of the Denon Senate Building, he couldn't help but sense his brother in the general direction he was supposed to go. As much as Jacen agreed with Kenth Hamner's opinion that the Jedi Order needed to really start recruiting again, he also disagreed with Kenth's decision over the Dantooine Force-sensitives.

"That's right," Jacen heard his younger brother. "Once you get there, just hang out for a bit. Things will definitely change once the Imperium gets wind of what we're doing, so consider this a vacation of sorts."
"*A vacation in potentially hostile territory with the purposes of pissing off the bosses on both sides?*" Jedi Knight Si'ada asked with a laugh. "*You do realize your boss probably won't be happy with this. If we do it his way, we can be in and out. Why have us wait around until the Rhysode gets there?*"
"His way, all sorts of political poodoo will hit the air-filtration system and splatter everywhere," Anakin said. "My way, the only place the poodoo will land is on Hamner's desk if he doesn't back down."
"*I'm sure he'll be very understanding about that*," Si'ada said wryly.
"I'm sure he'll be a lot more understanding when Jaina gets him to back down."
"*You really think your sister can defuse this mess?*"
"He won't listen to anyone over here. But if he hears it straight from the bantha's mouth, he's probably going to have a change of heart."
"*Okay, you're the boss, Director Solo."*
"Trying to avert another war," Anakin said drolly. "Have fun on Dantooine."
Jacen saw his brother on one of the Senate Building's many balconies with a handheld holo-comm. Anakin glanced up at Jacen as he palmed the device and slid it into a pocket.
"Hey Jace, don't you have a meeting?"
"What was that about?" Jacen gestured to the pocket with the comm.
"Playing political dejaarik," Anakin said with a forced smile.
"Sounds like you don't plan on following Hamner's orders."
"I have to, he's my boss," Anakin said lightly. "Like he wants, I'm sending my people to Dantooine with the orders to pick up Force-sensitives and bringing them to a Praxeum. It's not my fault if unforeseen complications ground their shuttle and force them to remain in orbit past their planned departure time."
"Uh huh," Jacen said.
"The Jedi Order needs strong allies too," Anakin said softly, joining Jacen in staring out at the view of the city.
"And the precedent this is setting?" Jacen said. "Everyone in the galaxy will see this as the Jedi Order backing down, as the Galactic Alliance being unable to enforce one of the key provisions in its charter. Other planets will see that if the Imperium can keep their Force-able people, why shouldn't they? And then how will the Jedi Order get people then?"
"Let's say it's done the way the Chief of State wants, the way *you* want it to be done. No matter how the Force-sensitives are retrieved, the

Third Imperium is going to be majorly steamed at it. Their economy may be heavily intertwined with the Galactic Alliances, but they can also do a whole lot of damage in turn. The Galactic Alliance is barely holding together as it is, just starting to recover from the damage done by the Killiks. If the Third Imperium suddenly decides to stop funding certain planets, they can actually deal a lot more damage to the GA than they in turn would take."
"We could have opened negotiations for those eleven," Jacen said. "That would have dragged on, leaving them in limbo. We both know that the Third Imperium would never consent to letting them go without concessions from the Chief of State that he probably wouldn't give. Ever since the Third Imperium made that decision to start keeping the Force-sensitives found in their space, they've been treating that as law even if we don't recognize it."
"And if we do it your way, a half-cocked retrieval mission that was deliberately scuttled? The Imperium will see this as an attempt to usurp their authority. Not to mention the effect it will have on the Jedi throughout the galaxy."
"At least there will still be a GA left to feel the repercussions," Anakin shrugged. "If the Third Imperium went so far as to secede, they'd be followed by a whole bunch of other fringe governments who'll realize that the GA has lost its touch. The chain-reaction from that will probably result in a much small GA operating in the Core and Inner Rim only. If the Jedi Order wants more people, they should switch their priorities around and make recruitment ahead of everything else."
"Something that will be harder if people see that we're letting the Imperials do what they want with their Force-sensitives," Jacen returned to the crux of the argument.
"Better a strong ally on the fringes of the galaxy than a weak one. And if other planets want to start their own Praxeums, I'm all for it. Decentralizing the training will ensure that the Jedi can tackle a diverse array of problems and can get to hotspots quicker."
"That's not your decision to make. You're part of the Galactic Alliance, not the Jedi Order."
"Kenth Hamner wants the Jedi Order to back up the GA. They can't with their current numbers and organization. The Jedi Order serves the people, and the GA *is* the people. Until the Jedi Order actually becomes strong enough to break away from the GA, until the GA is strong enough to afford the Jedi Order breaking away, we have to do the best we got with the framework we have."

"Are you going to at least tell Uncle Luke that you're not actually going to incite a war between the GA and Imperium? You're already in the dungheap with most the Jedi Masters."
"Can't appear to be their ally either," Anakin shook his head. "The Chief of State will stop giving me the latitude he's been giving me if he thinks I side too closely with our uncle."
Jacen shook his head. "You're even crazier than I thought."
Anakin laughed at that. "Crazier than I thought too. Look, Jacen. We might not always agree on things, but I know we both want the Jedi Order and Galactic Alliance to continue existing in one piece. How we go about it might be different, but no matter what I do or say in these meetings, it won't be personal."
"Then I should say the same," Jacen said slowly. "I know many people don't agree with your actions since returning to Denon, most of them are inside the Jedi Order. You definitely have that polarizing affect on people you know."
"I know."
"So, I might as well say this then, Anakin. No matter what I do or say in public, it won't be personal. You'll still be my little brother. But I also want the Galactic Alliance and Jedi Order fixed, and I'm going to go about it using my own methods."
"That's fair," Anakin said. "Should we give our parents a heads-up so they don't think we're doing our best to destroy each other for the sake of saving the galaxy?"
"Isn't that what we'll be doing?"
"Good point," Anakin blinked. "Errr…so they know we're not enjoying any single moment of it?"
"Admit it, Anakin. You'll enjoy coming up with the counters to whatever I have planned," Jacen laughed at that, his partially cybernetic vocal chords adding a reverb to his laughter. "We haven't played dejaarik in a long while."
"True. Okay, maybe we should just tell them that we're fixing the galaxy our own way and leave it at that. Might as well warn Jaya too. Don't want her thinking we're *actually* trying to kill each other or something."
"And we definitely don't want that," Jacen grinned. He reached out and took Anakin's offered hand. "Good luck, Anakin."
"You too, Jace. Now let's get back to work, we have a government and a Jedi Order to fix."

0-o-IV-o-0

"The other candidates for the Jedi Order Senate seat have lost sight of what it means to be a Jedi," Jacen spoke to the holo-cams and the

small audience of Jedi, the bright lights of the Denon Temple stage illuminating his traditional Jedi-robed form. As the last of three speakers, he needed to make sure his message was a memorable one.
"Have forgotten that a Jedi doesn't just tend to those with money or power, but to the little people too. Master Lobi, Master Kel, both are like Anakin Solo. They're so wrapped up in dealing death and destruction, that they've forgotten that Jedi also heal and make peace. They nearly started a war when they tried to take Third Imperium students from their homes, something no Jedi would have done. They're so like my sister in that they've ingratiated themselves with the political system, seeing only the problems they want to see and turning a blind eye to others. Like my sister, they spend most their time cozying up to politicians, to CEOs and planetary leaders, but haven't spent a day in the slums, in the refugee camps, in the places that truly need a Jedi. I am with Master Skywalker in saying that it is time the Jedi Order return to our roots, return to what our predecessors hundreds and thousands of years ago meant for us. We are meant to aid the helpless, protect the defenseless, not pad the pockets of politicians and participate in victory parades and speeches."
Jacen paused to let his words sink in, and then glanced at the timer. He still had a few seconds left.
"My brother and sister are both Jedi in name only," Jacen nodded. "You've seen the reports coming out of the Third Imperium. The non-humans are being treated as second and third-class citizens depending on how close to humans they resemble. They have non-human labor camps, openly pass laws that make the lives of non-humans a lot harder. And through it all, my sister carries on her relationship with a Moff and continues to train Force-sensitives despite the Jedi Order's demand that the Third Imperium stop. The last thing any of us want is an army of dark Jedi to deal with in the future, and that's exactly what we'll have. I'm not saying that my sister has gone dark, but she has definitely gone blind to the dangers out there now that she's the leader of their little academy. As for my brother, the right-hand of the Chief of State, he's more politician now than Jedi. Already there is talk on Bakura, in Tion, and Devaron of starting their own praxeums. All because he sent a ship over to Imperial space and failed to bring back the students. My brother is weakening the Jedi Order, and the High Council hasn't been able to stop them. It may not seem like it, but we are battling a rising tide of darkness for our very survival. The Jedi Order has to change, has to go back to our roots and discard all the trappings of the government we have somehow become a part of. If

elected, I promise to work with the High Council and Senate to make the Jedi something people respect once more. Thank you."
The timer went off, and Jacen bowed his head respectfully to his audience before sitting back in his seat. Luke Skywalker moved to the podium next. "There you have it, Jedi. Your candidates for the Jedi Order senate seat. Votes will be cast in two months, so I encourage you all to think of what you have heard today. Who best represents the Jedi Order that exists within your vision of what we should be."
The event over, Jacen stepped off the stage and took a swig of water from the bottle he was offered. The debate went had gone about as well as he had expected. Tresina Lobi had preached for closer ties to the Galactic Alliance, claiming the Jedi were now in a position to make policy and make ever-lasting changes. She talked of reunifying the Corellian and Dathomir Praxeums, of cementing a legacy that started with the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War. Waxarn Kel had huffed and puffed about the Jedi Order needing to do more in the field, integrating with the fleets and leaving the politics aside. He was all for military intervention to make things right, going after the heads of organizations that threatened galactic peace.
They each had their own group of supporters. But as Jacen began to walk around the crowd, shaking hands and answering questions, he couldn't help but notice that those around him outnumbered the groups around Waxarn and Tresina combined. He did his best not to smile as he politely acknowledged a Jedi Master from Ossus. Though he had faced the question of 'why should we expect anything to change because you've held the position for two terms and nothing's happened,' he had more or less laid out his plan for the next few years if elected. He'd pressure the Senate into freeing up Jedi so that more could be recruited in a timely manner, would also work with the GAG and Chief of State's office to get the Jedi out of the fleets and back among the common people. He had carefully crafted his answers from everything he had heard from those Denon students in the lower city, and saw from the bobbing of heads that Raxi had not been the only one to hold her beliefs.
Change, real change, as opposed to more of the same.
And his dedication to that idea appeared to be paying off.
Given how many of the Jedi were now on Denon for the elections, Jacen would say that he had definitely had the majority of the Jedi Order's support. There were still some of those who believed in the extreme views of Waxarn or Tresina, but they were few in number.
"Master Solo," Luke Skywalker greeted Jacen with a proud smile.
"Uncle," Jacen tilted his head slightly.

"Nice speech," Mara Jade Skywalker commented a bit more coldly.
"You don't agree?" Jacen raised an eyebrow.
"Throwing your brother and sister under the speeder?" Mara said, matching Jacen's expression.
"Every word is true whether you like it or not," Jacen commented.
"From a certain point of view of course. And given how most of the Order is congregated in my camp, it's the majority view. The Jedi Order needs to change, and the Jedi not on board are going to be left behind."
"With us or against us, huh?" Mara said neutrally.
"In this case, yes. You can either want the Jedi Order to return to its roots, or you don't," Jacen nodded. "With the way the galaxy is now, we don't have time for indecision."
"You do realize that Kenth Hamner plans to do the exact opposite with the Jedi Order?" Luke said.
"Yes, and I'll play along, but at the same time make sure the Jedi Order can extract themselves from the GA the moment they are able. Mom already laid some of the political groundwork for that move, now I have to build the frame on top of it."
"And your brother and sister?" Mara asked.
Knowing that there were holocams and other Jedi listening in, Jacen couldn't say the truth. "They'll get over it. They know that what I'm doing is good for the Jedi Order."
"For the Jedi Order or for you?"
"Both," Jacen said. "And it would help a great deal if one or both of you endorsed my actions. As the Grandmaster, and as a respected Jedi Master who knows the dark side, returning the Jedi Order to its roots should be your top priority."
Luke Skywalker shook his head. "As Grandmaster, I have to stay impartial, Jacen. All three candidates have good ideas that will benefit the Order in one way or another."
"And as much as I appreciate your goals," Mara said. "They way you're going about achieving them leaves a bad taste in my mouth."
"And the alternative is that the Jedi Order continues to passively accept the status quo," Jacen said mildly. "And things will continue as they were. We can't gain our independence without a few sacrifices."
"So your brother and sister are sacrifices now?" Mara said archly.
"They're hardly Jedi any more, Master Skywalker," Jacen said formally. "But anyone who tries to stop the Jedi from returning to their roots is not someone who will be beneficial to the Jedi Order. And Jedi are very adept at dealing with threats of that nature. Surely you don't think that

what Master Kel or Lobi proposes will actually help strengthen the Order?"
"They aren't my big-headed nephew," Mara said chidingly. "Don't let the goal and dream of a united Jedi Order of old make you discard everything you are."
"I'm not," Jacen shook his head and held his hands out to his sides. "In fact, if you set aside emotion for a moment, what I'm doing is in the exact spirit of the Jedi Order. No emotion, only peace. We can only return to our peacekeeping roles if we divest ourselves of the political interests and emotions we have towards the greater galaxy. No ignorance, only knowledge. The Jedi Order as a whole is finally waking up to the fact that we are driving ourselves to extinction. We can't keep the current course and expect to remain relevant five, ten years down the line. No passion, serenity. My brother and sister have flouted this by following their own emotions and beliefs, letting those guide them away from the Order. Those Jedi who wish for more war, the Jedi who want to tackle all problems big and small, are letting their passions rule them. Only by refocusing on what it means to be a Jedi, by thinking things through in a calm manner, can a solution truly be reached. No chaos, only harmony. What do you call this galaxy right now being protected by the current iteration of the Jedi Order? If the Jedi Code requires harmony, than we are most definitely doing something wrong. And lastly, no death, only the Force. We forget that we serve the Force first, the people second, and galactic governments if it helps our first two goals. We have had dozens of apprentices and Knights die in the Unknown Regions because this government wasn't willing to send more than the bare-bones in support. If that's the type of government we serve, the type that leaves the Jedi Order out to dry when the going gets tough, then they clearly don't have the best interests of the Order in mind. Grandmaster, you once named me the Conscience of the Jedi, a barometer to let us know when we are straying. Well, I'm letting the Order know now that that is the case. The Jedi Order needs an overhaul, a reminder of what it is supposed to stand for. Change might not be easy, will definitely require sacrifices on both our part and the government's, but it is something that must happen lest we lose the right to call ourselves Jedi. If anyone knows a way that is more efficient than my own, I welcome them to stand in my place. But as it is, my plan is currently the only one that will do all that I've said. So, Aunt Mara, if you don't have another solution, and don't want to support my run, then you are against the very principals of the Jedi Order, against me."

"You can't steamroll your way to a solution, force people to agree with you out of fear, and discard your family because they're inconveniences," Mara countered. "If that's the foundation of the Jedi Order you desire, then yes, I definitely want no part of it."
"The Jedi of the past had no family for that very reason, because those powerful emotions clouded their judgment. They lasted for over two-thousand years, we're lucky if we even see forty. But, I respect your opinion, Master Skywalker. I truly hope you can come up with an alternative plan to what I have. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to meet with my planning committee to discuss my question and answer session with the Jedi still in the field."
Jacen walked away from his bemused aunt and uncle, a trail of Jedi following him and asking for his opinion on one matter or another.
"Well, he does have his father's charm," Mara said darkly.
"He's doing what he thinks is best for the Order," Luke said evenly.
"At the expense of his family, of those he cares for?"
"He's young still," Luke said. "You have to remember that he isn't even thirty-years old yet. He'll learn that all the power and influence in the galaxy won't erase that loneliness he feels."
"Why don't you tell him that then, he'll listen to you."
"Will he?" Luke said. "The downside to always questioning is that sometimes you don't wait long enough to hear the answer. Sometimes, you only ask the questions to answers you want to hear. From the sense I gather from this crowd, the beliefs he espoused were shared by the majority. If he will not listen to myself, or Tenel Ka, or his mother, then I fear that he will learn his lesson the hard way."
"He's our nephew, Farmboy, you just can't sit on the sidelines and do nothing while he acts like a pompous blowhard."
"The more I oppose him, the more set in his beliefs he will become. All I can do is be there when things begin to fall apart and help him back to his feet."
"I don't like it."
"Neither do I, but at the moment, the popular sentiment is with Jacen, and this is currently what the Force wills. When the time comes, Jacen will come around. We just have to be patient."
"Alright Farmboy, but I'm holding you to that. Jacen better learn his lesson soon otherwise I'll give it a help by thumping him on the head one. The galaxy doesn't need the Jedi Order to survive, life will go on with or without the Jedi. When we start putting our own existence and survival above the good of everything else, nothing good can come of it."

"Will the Jedi Order be stronger returning to its roots, can it better the galaxy that way? I truly don't know. But Jacen was right on one count. Unless someone else has a better idea, then I say we give it a shot."
"And if it works, he'll probably try to become Grandmaster next."
"If it works, I'd welcome it."

0-o-V-o-0

"I thank you all for electing me to a third term as the Jedi Order's representative in the Senate," Jacen Solo addressed the crowd and holo-cams looking like the model Jedi in his finest Jedi Master attire. He had won by a landslide, with the next closest candidate—Waxarn Kel—garnering a meager twelve-percent of the vote. And now, on the steps in front of the Denon Senate building, staring down at the gathered masses, he addressed his audience. "I promise that I will help Grandmaster Skywalker and the other members of the High Council lead our Jedi Order out from the dark times of the Yuuzhan Vong and Swarm Wars and into an era of enlightenment and prosperity. My first order of business is to get the Senate to pass a law removing the Jedi from the fleet groups and ground combat forces. We are not soldiers, we are not the Galactic Alliance's weapons to be trotted out whenever there is a threat. Enough Jedi have died, that these past few years can count alongside the Yuuzhan Vong War and Palpatine's purge as one of the darkest times in our recent history. We fight, we die, and we have little to show for it but more darkness. I say no more! This battle of darkness is one that I will fight for all of you. It is a battle to remember just what it means to be a Jedi. These next few years are going to see some serious change, and I have to thank you again for that opportunity."

The crowd cheered in support, the younger generation of Jedi who had come home from the warring across the galaxy pumping their fists into the air. Soldiers who had fought alongside the Jedi, civilians who were listening in, even some of the Jedi-hostile senators joined in. The older generation of Jedi clapped politely, some frowning worriedly at the vigor at which Jacen's words were being greeted with.

"I mentioned this darkness we must do battle against. A darkness that exists within us all. As Jedi we must realize that we cannot do as the common soldier, politician, or civilian does. We cannot accept assignments from a singular government or from corporations with more credits than entire systems have. We cannot value our own family and friends above the well-being of this galaxy. Cannot value any one government over another. Right now we stand at a tipping point, a point where we can either choose chaos, or order. We give into to our emotions, fail to use logic to serve the common good, and we

condemn billions to their deaths, start a cycle of war that has Jedi leading it at every point. Even if we still must abandon our families for long periods of time, lose friends to save entire systems. This will happen on our terms, and not dictated to us by politicians too afraid to go out into the field themselves. *This* will be the ultimate test of selflessness—whether we are ready to face unending emotional pain, true agony, to create peace and order for billions of total strangers. It does not matter if the Galactic Alliance shuns us, if we are vilified or cast out, for in our hearts we know our duty as Jedi. To do our duty for the good of the galaxy no matter the cost. That is what I mean when I say that I will take up this battle of darkness, against ignorance, against willful blindness, so that the name of Jedi will once again ring true. Are you with me!"

A thunderous applause answered him as the Jedi across every praxeum stood and lauded Jacen's announcement. The vid-screens showing audiences from Corellia, Dathomir, Ossus, Yavin IV, and the Denon Temple, mirrored the scene at the Senate Plaza. Smiling faces, a sense of hope, of a new page being turned in the history of the Jedi Order. Cheers of 'Jacen' were picked up, the microphones across the praxeums ensuring that his name was chanted from the Core to the very outer edges of the galaxy.

Several HoloNet stations, however, picked up something almost immediately as the cameras panned across the crowd. Not present in any of the scenes from the other praxeums, or even in the Senate Plaza itself were any members of the Jedi High Council, or any of the Masters that oversaw the praxeums. The glaring absence of both the Skywalkers quickly became the hot-topic of many 'political analysts,' with some saying that Jacen's re-election would form a schism between the established older Jedi and the newer ones who were tired of dying for a government that showed them little respect in turn. Others still, suggested a new fight between Jacen Solo and Anakin Solo, whose ideologies seem to be the exact opposite of one and other.

But at the moment, as Jacen soaked in the praise and yells of support, he was ignorant of all of it. Even as the Denon sun began to set behind the towering buildings, and the golden light faded from where Jacen was standing atop the stairs, the crowd continued to cheer, continued to hope, chanting his name almost fanatically. And as daylight withdrew from the plaza completely, as the shadows darkened over the stairway and lengthened over Jacen's figure, he held out his hands and embraced the roaring crowd before him.

The sun may have been setting, but a new era was on the verge of dawning for everyone.

And so, a destiny was altered, a fate unseen, the ripples created in another time continue to spread outwards through the Force. When the dust settles, all that will be left is its legacy.
0-o-Story End-o-0

Korriban
0-o-I-o-0
A month after the battle for Hapes
Alema Rar stood atop a time-worn sculpture to some Sith hero of ancient past, her body impervious to the sandstorm whipping about thanks to the several layers of clothing she had on. Not the most comfortable in the cold heat of the planet, but bright blue skin on a planet of dull reds and browns really stood out. And right now the last thing she wanted to do was stand out.
It was a dangerous game she was playing. One her fellow player Vergere had evidently lost at if the currents in the Force were anything to go by. That was definitely saying something. She knew that the Fosh Force-sensitive had been at it for many decades, had pledge allegiances to so many sides that eventually those pledges would catch up to her. The means were justified by the ends, or so Alema liked to think.
Why else would she have integrated herself with a secret Sith cult for the past decade and do things so unspeakable she couldn't look herself in the mirror anymore? Why else would she voluntarily hang out with a boss that liked to flash her with lightning every now and then, help him plot to take over the galaxy? A galaxy currently being propped up by everyone she had once considered friends.
What was a friend to her now but a crutch, a weakness. Something she couldn't afford to have with all the firaxan circling around her. She had no friends, had no family. Just as she understood Vergere to be loyal only to herself, Alema held a similar view. What she did was for herself, for her own happiness…
And the happiness of the people she cared for.
"She make it back to Corellia okay?" Alema spoke to the figure in the holo-comm unit in her hand.
"*What's left of her*."
"She's still alive, I can feel it."
"*We both know there's a difference between being alive and actually living, Rar. I understand the reasons for what you did, but I can't forgive you in the slightest."*
"If that investigative, crafty husband of yours even gets a hint…"

"*I know what's at stake here*," Mirax Terrik Horn said coolly. No warmth in her voice. "*It's the only reason I haven't told them anything no matter how badly they're hurting. And Valin, is he doing okay…*"
"What's left of him," Alema said in turn, swallowing heavily as she did. She looked off into the distant sunset, the oranges and reds lighting up the sandstorm swirling around her. "You know the difference between being alive and living."
"*Jysella…She's no longer the person we know, knew…*"
"Gone dark?" Alema said with a faint laugh. She didn't even want to reach out to try and check on the girl she saw as a little sister. After all, it'd be just her luck that she had ruined another life. That seemed to be the pattern with anyone who got to know her. Maybe, she mused, that's why she jumped in bed with the Sith. Hoping that the same cruel twist of fate that hurt everyone she cared for would also hurt the Sith.
"*Not…not all the way. At least not according to Corran. She's just grieving. We're going to join Anakin's little force out in the Unknown Regions. Apparently there are more bugs on the way.*"
"Anakin's in charge, you guys will make it out. But if you think this war is something…" Alema shook her head, her wry smirk hidden behind the wrap covering the lower half of her face. She let out an almost insane choked sob. "The galaxy's going to burn so badly and there's absolutely nothing I can do to stop it. I set in motion a whole bunch of things that have just tumbled out of control. We take any action and they disappear. We don't do anything and we get steamrolled. We lose either way."
"*At least you're still grouping yourself with the clueless 'us' over here. Still won't tell me where you've taken my only son or why you two have to cut yourself off from the people that care about you*?"
"Still won't." Alema confirm. "Look, I have to go. Thanks for the latest update. I'll pass it on to Val."
"*Tell him…well…will anything I say help him at the moment?*"
Alema shook her head soundlessly.
"*I thought as much. Please, Alema. I feel like such a horrible mother, sacrificing the sanity of my daughter for that of my son. But I know what Valin had turned into, I stare at it every day now when I see Jysella. Make it worth it.*"
"I can only promise to try my best," Alema said hoarsely, glad that her goggles kept any tears from showing. "Hey, tell Sella that she shouldn't forget to dance every now and then, no matter how bad things might get."
"*I'll pass the word along. Good luck and may the Force be with you*."

The holo flickered off, and Alema slipped it into the folds of her clothing. She sensed someone else approaching and lithely jumped off the towering remains of the statue to the dusty ground.
"Looking for me, Morto?" Alema asked the large Togorian dark Jedi.
"Out for a walk, Night Herald?" The furry dark Jedi growled. "Here to bid the sun farewell and greet the evening?"
"Claustrophobic," Alema said airily. "Grew up as a slave crammed in cages, can't stand enclosed spaces and those tombs you guys like to camp out in definitely qualify. You need something?"
"Our Master demands your presence."
"Oh, so did the boy I bring pass?" Alema walked in time with the larger creature, stepping out of the dying sunlight and into the shadows cast by the giant cliff walls around them.
"You know he did."
"Don't have to sound so disappointed. I brought him here to strengthen the glory that is the One Sith."
"Sarcasm does not become you."
"I thought it was very becoming of me," Alema pulled off her head wraps and shook her lekku free. "That disappointed that you won't see Lord Krayt shock me into unconsciousness again?"
"Very," Morto replied tersely. "Your failures have been numerous of late and I was hoping that the boy would be your last."
"Hate you too, Mort," Alema shortened his name, reducing the big, bad furry dark Jedi into a Gamorean parasite. She took a small amount of pleasure in the spike of annoyance and anger she caused.
They fell silent for the rest of the trip through the tomb, the narrow passageways illuminated by torches along the wall. Alema kept her gaze straight forward, the flickering lights playing with the numerous dark geometric tattoos that now covered her arms, face and lekku. Passing from one threshold to another, her eyes shifted from green to yellow, her smile taking on a more manic overtone as she stepped into the main chamber of the tomb.
Awaiting her was the ruling council of the One Sith, including its leader Darth Krayt. Valin was in the middle of the room, on bended knee before the humanoid Sith lord, looking none-the-worse for wear in the dark miasma of the tomb. Surrounding him were several bodies, all unfortunate slaves or explorers who had been abducted by the One Sith's hunting teams.
"My Night Herald," Krayt chuckled raspily. "You never cease to amuse me."

"I live to serve," Alema performed a mocking, sweeping bow. She then gestured to the bodies surrounding Valin. "I take it you approve of the boy?"
"He is very much like you," Krayt inclined his head. "Bitter with the Force. He has anger, hate, despair. When he faced the apparition of his sister in the tomb of Ragnos, he slew her unflinchingly. Same when told to rid the galaxy of the filth you see around him."
"That's my boy," Alema said cheerily. "So, can I keep him?"
"He will kill you one day, you are aware of that?" Sith Lady Brood commented mildly. "His hate for you burns in his very core."
"Oh, I have no doubt about that," Alema smiled toothily. "Part of his hate comes from the pain I've inflicted on his family by taking him away. But that just makes it all the more fun, doesn't it? Helping him grow, waiting for the day he has the right stuff to take me down? Isn't that the dream of every parent and proud Sith Lord or Lady, having their young grow big and strong and surpass them?"
"As insane as ever," snorted Lord Namman Cha. "You should join Lord Ternaax's group."
"He's a bit old for me," Alema said dismissively. "I don't want to hang out with a bunch of senile senior citizens. Lord Krayt, I assume there's more. You never summon me for the good news."
"You are right, of course," Krayt nodded. "Oh, and you may keep the boy, if only to amuse us all when he finally disposes of you. No, I've called you here to introduce someone who can possibly be the newest addition to our council. Someone, whom I believe you are acquainted with."
Alema tested the Force, then blinked very slowly. "You've brought that witch's apprentice here?"
"I disposed of her for us, I thought you'd appreciate it," Lady of the Sith Lumiya emerged from the shadows of the gathered members of the One Sith. "Hello again, I'm glad to see that my lessons have made a lasting impression."
Ignoring the half-cybernetic Sith, Alema knelt before Krayt. "My Lord Krayt, no disrespect meant, but Syo, or whatever she calls herself these days is hardly worth a council position. Sure she killed Vergere, but as you said, anyone can kill. And that old bird had one foot in the door already."
"You are bold to approach…"
"Only for the good of the One Sith, my lord," Alema said quickly. "Vergere always had her own agenda, a trait she passed down onto that half-woman there. Vergere and Lumiya never joined you for a good reason, is it so wise to welcome her with open arms now?"

"You have some gall," Lumiya stepped forward, glaring.
"When we first met, Syo, I was only a learner. Wouldn't you say I've learned my lessons well?" Alema said cheerily.
"Silence. Night Herald, using my own words now?" Krayt leaned forward in his seat, resting both hands on his walking staff. "Tell me, what am I to do with her then?"
"Give her to me, my lord," Alema said, hiding a sadistic smile. "Have her serve me, and any scheming she does against the Sith will be my fault. No risk to this council and yourself, and we still can make use of her abilities."
The Chagarin Sith advisor to Krayt spoke up. "She does speak the truth, my lord. Therefore, I'd advise you to listen. Despite her failings, the Night Herald's advice has not yet led the One Sith astray. If it is the long game she is playing, then she has outwitted all of us here, and I do not believe she is that crafty. Therefore, it'd behoove us to again listen to the madness she spews. Should Lumiya continue her Bane's antiquated ideals, then she is a threat to you, my lord. Therefore, we should put her at a distance, make the Night Herald the first casualty should Lumiya turn on us."
"Thank you Wyyrlok," Alema inclined her head slightly.
"Very well," Krayt smiled, as if amused by the exchange. "Both the boy and Lumiya are now under your command, Night Herald. With your years of service, you've earned that much."
"I am honored," Alema tilted her head. "Thank you for listening to my rambling words, my Lord."
"Be gone now, I'll let you set up the dynamics of your little group. Should you need any slaves to train that boy of yours, just let me know. I'm feeling generous today."
"And I am grateful for that generosity." Alema rose again. "Come, Valin, Lumiya. We have a lot to do."
They left the council room, but the moment they stepped out into the Korribani sunlight, a new presence made herself known.
"You emerge at last."
Alema and the others paused at the doorway. Alema smiled falsely.
"Lady Sani. You're still alive."
"As are you."
"The kids?"
"I left them in the hands of some Imperial general," the raspy-voiced woman said dismissively. "Completely anonymous drop-off of course as that intelligence general isn't one of our people. I'm sure the Rae girl you were so fond of will fit in just fine with that Imperial Order of theirs."

"Good. I'd hate for you to continue to use them as leverage since I returned as promised," Alema said darkly. She looked to Valin and Lumiya. "Go on ahead to that place Darth Krayt said we could use, I'll be with you shortly."
Lady Sani emitted a snort. "That remains to be seen, Night Herald. My apprentice tells me you've been very bad at being loyal."
"Morto will say a lot of things," Alema said, leaning casually against the supporting pillar of the tomb they were in front of.
The older lady of the Sith, face hidden in the shadows of her hooded robe, remained where she was. "But there are always grains of truth to his words. Your new apprentice, scion of the Halcyon line, for example."
"You're well informed."
"Genetic tests are easy to come by, even out here."
"Your point?"
"Just that a Halcyon has never fallen as far as you claim this one has."
"Always a first."
"That boy strays, proves weak or a detriment to the One Sith, I will not hesitate to have Morto end his life."
"As expected of the One Sith's counter-intelligence leader, getting others to do your killing for you," Alema mock applauded. "Are you going to make any more threats? You do realize that I hardly care whether Valin lives or not. If one of you kill him, it'll just go to show he wasn't up to the job."
"Merely letting you know that my eyes are on you."
"As are all the other members of the council," Alema answered back. "You all have been watching me with a microscope for the past nine years, and I have done nothing but prove time and again that my actions benefit the One Sith in ways no one else would have been able to do. Lord Namman Cha is more likely to betray Darth Krayt than I, but I don't see you siccing your pets on him."
"Lord Cha learned his lesson and is half the man he once was because of it," Lady Sani answered back. "He knows his place. You, however, continue to push the boundaries on what our Lord allows. I will say it again. Your apprentice will die by the hands of my own if he steps out of line. Please remind him of that, he looks like such a promising young man."
"Go bother Cronal now," Alema made a shooing motion. "I hear he's starting to have delusions of grandeur again."
Lady Sani tilted her head slightly, and went her own way.
Only then did Alema exhale in relief. Taking time off to reconnect herself to the light side of the Force had been a huge risk for her. She

had justified it as an 'intelligence gathering' period, getting the lay of the land, an updated who's who in the Jedi Order. She doubted many of the council bought it, but her reports kept them satisfied. Returning, but with the son of a famous Jedi Master, had been even riskier. She hadn't told Valin, but there had been a very high chance of them killing him outright rather than risk him being a turncoat. She was just grateful that his talent for mind-manipulation and shielding hadn't degraded in his current state of misery.

Collecting herself once more, Alema put her all-purpose smile on and went after Valin and Lumiya. Sure she might have won a battle keeping Lumiya off the inner council. But now that treacherous woman was her problem, one that would more than likely come back to bite her later. Wasn't much Alema could do now though. Picking up her pace, Alema let the desert canyon landscape of the Valley of the Dark Lords whip by her. She hoped the Force would continue to be with her. If not, everything was going to end really messily, and that wasn't really preferable.

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"Don't look so dour, Lumiya," Alema chirped with a laugh, pacing around the main chamber of the tomb they had been given as a training ground. "I'll give you plenty of people to kill. You'll be like my own little pet assassin."

Lumiya's eyes glared daggers at Alema. "You know not the plans you are messing with, Alema."

Alema cleared her throat. "Eh hm, you're addressing Lord Krayt's personal Night Herald. And if you're referring to your plan to mess with the Solos, forget it."

Lumiya raised an eyebrow. "Plan?"

"Don't insult my intelligence, Lumiya. It's no wonder you never made it big time. You went after Anakin, but he's too family oriented to go full dark. Vergere had her claws in Jacen, and you figured he'd be a good apprentice for yourself so you offed Vergere. You joined the One Sith so they'd let you scheme and plan to your heart's content, building up Jacen so he'd be the next big bad Sith."

"And you are going to stop me?"

"No, I'm going to give you a better plan," Alema said. "You see that boy there, Valin Horn? You're going to help me train him since I have zero experience in training apprentices. The only difference between him and your past apprentices is I'll be around to make sure he stays among the living. Then, you're going to help me make this faction the most powerful in the One Sith. Forget Bane's Rule of Two. How can two

Sith ever hope to hold the whole galaxy together when hundreds of Jedi can't?"
"The Solos…."
"Are off limits," Alema said, her yellow eyes flashing murderously. "You even think about messing with that family and I'll kill you myself. If they fall in Darth Krayr's return, then it is clear that the Force doesn't want them alive, but you are not going to help the Force along in that regard. Clear?"
Staring at the shimmering silver blade hovering centimeters away from her throat, Lumiya raised an eyebrow. "Crystal."
"Glad we have an understanding. You want power, revenge, and all the fun things us dark Jedi want. I can give them to you, but you need to be patient."
"The Skywalkers, then."
"I couldn't care less about them," Alema shrugged. "If your problem is with Master Skywalker, have fun."
"Then we have an accord," Lumiya tilted her head.
"Great, I'd hate to have to kill you so quickly after our reunion."
"Your boy is being very quiet," Lumiya gestured to Valin's seated figure.
"Ripped of his family, absolutely despairing," Alema said lightly. "Can't you feel how dead he is inside. I did half the work for you."
Lumiya studied Valin for a long moment, then looked back to Alema. "His mental barriers are impeccable. Much like your own. Does Lord Krayt know of *your* schemes, Rar?"
"Schemes?" Alema said with the same tone Lumiya had used only seconds earlier.
"Now who's insulting whose intelligence? Lady Sani didn't stop you just for a pleasant chat," Lumiya chided. "You were never the serving type. As strong as your barriers are, you maintain a sliver of a connection to the light. And I have no doubt that sliver is powered by your feelings for that Anakin boy. Or if you've forgotten, I was a witness to everything the two of you did on the asteroid."
"Great, I found a perverted, voyeur, failure of a dark Jedi to train you Valin, doesn't that sound great?" Alema said without reacting to Lumiya's words.
"Just wonderful," Valin said deadpan.
"Perfect," Alema's yellow eyes flashed to Lumiya. "You can bring up the past all you want, but I've changed since that time. Light side, dark side, does it really matter what part of the Force we use? We're part of a group that wants to cut the population of the galaxy back by a couple billion and establish their own rule. Even when we both have

goals contrary to that. You help me, I'll help you. You want revenge against Skywalker, I can help. But you also have to make Valin here the scariest thing the acolytes in the training grounds have seen and felt."
"You want to help? If I had you kill Mara Jade Skywalker, or even their son, you'd do it?"
"The Skywalkers never did me any favors," Alema shrugged. "Carry out your end of the bargain first though."
"Of course," Lumiya said, regarding the blue-skinned Twi'lek. "You have definitely changed since the *Home*."
Alema's responding smile held no warmth. "And don't I know it."
0-o-III-o-0
"So now what?" Valin said, when Lumiya finally left to prepare for his training. "Are we going to spend the rest of our days plotting evil deeds in the shadows of this Force-forsaken place?"
"Man, you really are that far gone if killing those slaves didn't so much as leave a dent on you," Alema commented mildly. She was sitting cross-legged, quasi-meditating and listening to Valin at the same time. "I mean, I've known some cold-hearted people, but don't you feel even the slightest bit of guilt over their deaths?"
"If I hadn't killed them, one of the others would have," Valin shrugged, taking a seat in front of Alema. "At least this way, their deaths helped me pass my initiation and kept my head on my shoulders. Like most things in the galaxy, it was either them or me. I chose me."
Alema opened her eyes, which were bright green now that she no longer had to put up her dark-side mask. Her face softened at the almost emotionless, dullness in Valin's eyes. "The others were right, you know. One of these days, you're probably going to kill me."
"That won't happen."
"Why did you come with me in the first place? You know your sister and father are suffering, can probably feel them."
"Would it have been any different if I stayed," Valin answered. "I'm a Jedi with a death-wish, and the chances are I would have brought the rest of them down with me."
"You're not here for power? For a chance to be better than who you are?"
"I'm here because you promised that the training you have in store for me would make me better."
"I didn't say better," Alema shook her head. "It will break and then rebuild you. Whether that new you is better than the old new will be entirely up to you."
"Still playing games, Twi'lek," Valin shook his head.

"Of course, human. How else would I pass the time?" Alema dusted off her pants and stood. "Come with me."
"What?"
"Follow." Alema said tersely, her green eyes cooling. "You think your tough-guy routine will get you through this, will protect you from what Lumiya and I have planned? Well I got news for you, it'll only make you break all the more faster, all the more harder. This planet isn't Force-forsaken, but seeped in the dark side. It's in the air you breathe, in the ground you walk on, in your dreams, in your very sweat. The more you resist it, the faster it claims you. There's a reason why the Jedi were never able to maintain a presence down on the surface at any point in time. A reason why the Jedi have all but forgotten about this planet."
"What's the point, Twi'lek?"
Their footsteps fell heavy and fast in the long-forgotten tomb. "I wasn't joking with Lumiya when I told her to help me make my faction the most powerful in the One Sith. Jedi alone cannot beat Darth Krayt, he's too skilled in VongForce and the dark side. Someone skilled in the dark arts, as well as the light, however, can. That someone is you."
"You're making me into a weapon?"
"Yes," Alema's eyes were completely yellow now. "You want a purpose? A goal to strive for other than a quick death? Here it is. You are going to break and then mould yourself into the weapon this galaxy will need you to be. Like me, you will be the vibroblade at Krayt's throat. The Solos and the others will be too busy taking down the rest of Krayt's sycophantic council. Will no doubt be tied up for years. All the while we will bide our time, build our strength, and then decapitate the head at the most opportune of moments."
"From what I've seen, Darth Krayt is hardly stupid. Do you really think he'll let you be that vibroblade at his throat?"
"Oh I'm sure he's expecting me to betray him," Alema smiled crookedly. "He's an expert at the long game too. In fact, if it wasn't for me, he wouldn't have attacked the galaxy for another century at least. But so long as I play the good servant, kill the people he tells me to and destabilize the area he wants in chaos, he'll keep me around."
They emerged out into the Korriban night, the air warm from the heat leaving the rocks all around them. The distant cries of the tuk'ata were the only signs of nearby life on the world lit by the seven moons in the sky. The two were mere shadows as they traversed the ancient training grounds of generations of Sith.
"And what was that bit about me killing you?"

"It's simple. You mentioned earlier that Krayt won't keep me around forever. I fully expect him to have you prove your loyalty to the One Sith by killing me. It's the Sith way after all."
They entered the ruined remains of another tomb through a hole just big enough for someone to crawl at the bottom of one of the cliffs.
"You really are crazy," Valin shook his head in disbelief, inching forward behind Alema. The crawl was short, and they emerged in an antechamber of sorts, Sith writing carved into the very walls.
Alema lit a small pool of oil with a burst of Force-fire, and the blue lighting traversed down a niche along the wall deeper into the tomb.
"You'd think so, right?" Alema said, smiling wryly. The flickering light causing her tattooed form to look even more striking. She stopped in the center of the antechamber and turned around to face Valin. Her eyes shone almost manically as her lips twisted in a distorted grin, arms held out at her sides. "Everything I've done up until now, it's all been for the better. At least that's what I tell myself so I can sleep at night. The lives I've taken, ruined, twisted, it was all so I could stay at the side of this Sith Lord and mess with his plans to take over the galaxy. Like you said, what's one or two lives that would have been killed anyway to the lives of the millions or billions of others we'd be in a position to save later on. My only wish when I die is for you to remember the me I once was, before the universe decided to turn against me. Remember me as that beautiful, fun-loving, strong, brave, admirable Twi'lek who befriended your family and tried to do the right thing."
"You're not dead yet."
Alema chuckled at his naivety. "Do you truly think I'm going to survive the coming war, Valin? I've burnt too many bridges, made too many enemies. Even I can see my end. Whether I die at your hand, at Krayt's, or some random Jedi who was lucky enough to catch me off-guard, I'm going to die. And you know what? I don't care in the slightest. As long as I die fighting for what I believe in, as long as I die 'me', then it's enough."
"And what makes you think I'll last any longer?" Valin asked, meeting her green-eyed stare unflinchingly. "You've dragged me into the same plot."
She smiled sadly in turn. "Because you still have a family that will love and care for you. A place that will welcome you with open arms, without reservation. You still have a place in the Jedi Order, a place on Corellia or wherever else you decide to set your roots. When you return to them, you'll be able to walk along the streets lauded as a hero, as a brave and daring Jedi who successfully managed to infiltrate the first

truly Sith Empire in millennia and bring it down from within. You're Valin Horn, heir to that twisted family line of yours with a history that goes back to who knows when. The thing that annoys me the most, Valin, the reason why I pulled you away from that, is because you were taking all that for granted."
"I was n…"
Alema surprised Valin by taking a step forward, hauling him up by the collar of his shirt, and slamming him into the nearby wall despite him being nearly twice her size. Her green eyes took on a yellow tint as she hissed angrily. "Jysella practically idolizes you, and she's still among the living! You have a mom and dad—also still living despite all the wars this galaxy has seen—who'd move whole planets for you. Heck you even have a home planet, a house, had hundreds of people willing to look to you for orders. Compared to me, you were living the kriffin' high life. I never knew my parents, had no cozy bed to sleep in as a kid or people to read me bedtime stories. Heck, most of the things that happened in my bed as a child were stuff of nightmares. My only company during those dark times as a slave was my sister, who had her face melted off in front of me by a voxyn. My master was killed when I was fourteen. I'm wanted on nearly every single Galactic Alliance planet with a police-force so I can't even settle down. And the most screwed up thing is, the closest I ever got to feeling loved after the death of my sister was in the arms of Anakin on that dark-side asteroid Lumiya lured him to. And now I've heard he's married and has a pair of tots running around. Then I see you, going through the motions of daily life because the Vong War screwed up your brain. Boo-hoo! It's like you don't even care that you have a *loving, living,* family when billions of others don't."
"I care…"
"You have a funny way of showing it," Alema let him go and turned around, hugging herself with one arm. "You really don't know how lucky you are, Valin. How, there are days when I wish I'd wake up and be back in Anakin's arms on that asteroid, or dancing with my sister in that great stage in the sky. Your sister is an amazing person, and like everything I touch, I ruined her just by being her friend. Your dad, he gave me a chance when none of the other masters would, let me into your family even after everything he knew about me. And your mom, she's the smartest of the bunch. She's the one who figured out I faked our deaths, was the one who sent out feelers in the underworld and got my comm frequency. Something about not believing someone is dead until she can see the body. And you were ignoring them all!"
"Alema…"

Alema sniffled, and wiped at her eyes, her lekku twitching. "You were ignoring them all, wasting what the Force was nice enough to let you have. Now you see why I had to act!"
Valin swallowed. "I didn't ask for your help, didn't want it."
"And I sure as Sith didn't want to screw with your family any more than I already have, but not everyone can get their way," Alema said, turning away from him and beginning to walk down the blue-lit passageway. "Come on, we need to go to the inner-sanctum."
"Why?"
"Are you ever going to just do what I say without asking questions?"
Valin followed her despite his doubts. "Dad trained me to be an investigator."
"Right, your dad has his downsides too," Alema chuckled. "To answer your question, we're getting you a new wardrobe. You can't very well walk around on this planet in Jedi robes or those standard-issue 'I-am-Sith' jumpsuits those other trainees are wearing."
"You want me to wear some dead old Sith's clothing?"
"When you put it that way," Alema sighed, shaking her head. "You really have to take the fun and sense of adventure out of everything, don't you? We're tomb-robbing! Going to get you the robes of an ancient and powerful Sith of a bygone era!"
"Some dead guy's clothing," Valin repeated blandly.
"I knew I should have kidnapped your sister instead," Alema said dourly.
"I thought all these Sith tombs had traps and the like," Valin spoke. "At least according to Master Tionne's stories."
"They do, the main one was at the entrance."
"It was?"
"Sith were big on sacrifice. To safely pass through, you had to weaken yourself mentally."
"Wait, then everything you said…"
"True, every word. Do you really think I'm the type of girl who suddenly spills her guts like that?"
Valin just shook his head in amazement. "How'd you find this place?"
"Went exploring my first few months here. The ship I came in pointed the place out to me and warned me about that security measure."
"A ship pointed the place out and warned you?" Valin repeated incredulously.
"Well, yeah. It flew off a year later on its own, stranding me with the crowd we're in. Still kind of upset about that. I liked that ship."
Valin didn't quite know what to say to that.

"Anyways, this was a relatively minor Sith, I think. It's the only trap that I've found so far."
"And the clothes of the dead guy?"
"Resplendent robes of an ancient Sith," Alema corrected.
"Yeah that…have you tried looting it yet?"
"Nope, fully expect that guy's spirit to pop out and do something," Alema said cheerfully.
"It could collapse the tomb on us," Valin pointed out. "Many ancient tombs have that failsafe."
"We'll be careful."
The inner-sanctum of the tomb turned out to be a pretty cramped, square room with a simple sarcophagus in the center. A small hole in the domed ceiling allowed a pale beam of moonlight to illuminate the central region of the room. Unlike the gray-black stone of the sarcophagus, the walls were made of the same brown-orange rock that was prevalent across Korriban. The walls were blank, with no script or images surviving the tests of time. The blue flames had stopped a few meters from the actual chamber, so the only source of light was the beam coming through the ceiling.
"Now what?"
"This," Alema fired lightning at the sarcophagus, which promptly blew the stone lid to pieces in a noisy crackle-bang.
"Very subtle. I thought we were being careful." Valin grimaced, holding up a hand to ward off the pieces of flying rock.
"I am, if the trap was touch activated, no sense touching the sarcophagus."
When the dust settled, the two peered into the open casket. The body and most of the clothing had long dissolved into dust, leaving only a black and gold-lined mask.
"Oh well," Alema looked a bit disappointed. She leaned forward to pick up the mask. "I guess the guy really was a minor Sithy."
"*WHO DARES!?*" An apparition materialized above the sarcophagus. Decked out in full Sith refinery, face obscured by the spectral version of the mask in Alema's hand, the spirit did not appear all that happy.
"Look, it's the minor Sithy," Valin said in an almost a bored tone.
"Major Sith wouldn't say something as cliché as 'who dares.'"
"Hi Minor Sithy. Mind if we take your mask?" Alema said perkily.
"*I am the Right Hand of Marka Ragnos, Lord of Destruction, Conqueror of….!*"
"Great, can we take your mask?" Alema cut him off. "Or do we need to find the Left Hand too?"

Valin hung his head, wondering not for the first time about the sanity of his supposed 'savoir.
"*That mask is imbued with a fraction of the strength of Marka Ragnos, a reward for when I slew the Jedi Grandmaster Af..."*
"Yeah, yeah, look, can we take the mask or not?"
"*Insolent whelp! Know the power of the Hand of Ragnos!*" The apparition fired lightning at Alema, who promptly jerked to the side and let it blast a hole in the wall behind her. Her lightsaber then snapped to life and intercepted the rest of the barrage.
"Valin, you want to handle this guy?"Alema said, the strain of warding off the barrage slightly apparent by her intense focus.
"How do I kill a ghost?" Valin said in disbelief."It's not like I can cut him in half or anything."
"The guy's made of Force-energy. You absorb Force-energy, do I have to draw a diagram or something!"
Valin blinked. He reached out with the Force and felt the malevolent spirit before him. He thought of Alema's idea, then shook his head.
"You do know that absorbing a ghost isn't the same as absorbing a blaster bolt."
"Do you want to absorb his lightning instead!" Alema gritted out, beads of sweat now running down her forehead.
"I was not the one interrupting the ghost and trying to take his mask," Valin protested.
"Valin!"
"Fine!" Valin clenched his jaw and began to draw on the Force energy that surrounded the spirit.
Though he had never absorbed a spirit before, he didn't think the concept was too far off from absorbing blasterbolts. Taking the natural energies of the nature around him and making it his strength was a family trait. Only he didn't think the Jedi would be too happy with this particular usage of that trait. He was essentially absorbing the life-essence of a Force-creature with the clear intent to destroy it. But heck, he was on Korriban, lightyears away from the nearest person who might lecture him.
Said spirit immediately realized what was happening and jerked his head towards Valin. "*You will not bind me!*"
Alema deactivated her lightsaber and caught the lightning barrage with both hands, forcing the attack to stay on her. "Nah uh, I'm the one who's stealing your mask, remember? He just wants to absorb your essence."

"Would you quit antagonizing the minor Sithy!" Valin grunted, feeling the Sith resist with considerable strength as its anger spiked. "He's pretty strong for a dead guy!"
"Just make him go poof already!"
"What do you think I'm trying to do! I've never absorbed a spirit before!" Valin strained against the counter-pull of the Sith's will, wondering how long Alema could keep up what she was doing.
"Well stop thinking about doing it and do it, otherwise I'm going to get more crispy than I bargained for!"
Valin mentally swore, fighting the Sith for every iota of the being's essence. Alema was visibly beginning to wilt under the sustained barrage. If he didn't do something quickly, her sacrifice wouldn't have done anything but wasted her life.
Then, the thought came to him…sacrifice. Sith tomb. A weakening of mind, of body. Eyes darting to the jagged edge of the shattered sarcophagus, he gritted his teeth and abruptly ran his hand across the stone surface. A cut opened up, blood bubbling up out of the wound. On instinct, he held his hand over the sarcophagus, letting the blood flow freely and unabated. As the blood dripped into the inner recesses and onto the Sith's dusty remains, Valin felt the Sith's strength ebb. Eyes hardening with knowledge of his immanent victory, Valin redoubled his efforts. He drew upon all of his loathing, his own hate and despair, that bit of insanity that had taken him after the war. He called upon his family lineage, his courage and tenacity. He summoned power from both sides of the Force, the energy roaring the chamber with cyclonic force. "Submit to me!"
"*NEVER!*"
Valin allowed a cocky smile, his face looking for a fraction of a second like the young teen he had once been pre-Yuuzhan Vong War as he discharged all of his emotions, everything that had built up in him over the years, into the spirit. "You don't have a choice, buddy."
With one powerful yank, he shattered the Sith's defenses, the Force energies whipping about the small chamber. The lightning attack ended, and Alema promptly poured her own strength into Valin. The Sith, caught in the web of Valin's Force attack, wailed futilely as his body began to break apart.
With one last yell, Valin ripped the spirit to pieces, sucking in the energy, and then sending the absorbed energy shooting out through the top of the tomb in a brilliant display of light.
Sagging, Valin took a seat, using the remnants of the sarcophagus as a back-support. He tore a strip from his robes and used it to bandage his hand.

Breathing heavily, Alema sat next to him, holding out their prize. The ebony mask appeared to be made of some sort of composite material; wood, metal, and cloth fibers dyed a midnight black. By the intricate carvings, the mask was designed to resemble someone who's eyes and mouth had been sewn shut. A single slat allowed the wearer a line of sight and was masked by the various etchings on the otherwise smooth surface. It looked so simple and deceptive, but definitely had an aura of a Force-imbued object.
"Here's your mask ,Valin. Wasn't that fun?"
Winded, exhausted, and slightly delirious, Valin managed a ghost of a smile and took it from Alema. He stared at the inky surface, then emitted a weak laugh. He had to admit, venting all that bottled up frustration on a millennia-dead Sith felt kind of good."Yeah."

0-o-IV-o-0

Present day

"Impressive, isn't it?" Alema murmured to her masked apprentice. Valin had now been on Korriban for a year, being trained in the unique way Vergere and Lumiya trained their apprentices but tempered by Alema's input. After spending that time in seclusion, often brought to the brink of insanity in one ancient tomb or another by Lumiya's training methods, he was now standing on the threshold of the One Sith's training academy.
The months had passed by in a blur for him. Whether he was starving and cold in the wilderness of Korriban being hounded by ravenous tu'kata, shut up in an ancient tomb with Sith spirits for a full week, reliving the worst moments of his life and being forced to forget the best, he'd rather not think of that lost time. But Alema had definitely kept her word. The unorthodox training methods she and Lumiya employed had forced him to face his demons, to face the very things that had eaten away at him since the Yuuzhan Vong War. In true Sith fashion, he didn't just talk his way through his problems, but violently fought them as well.
One memorable 'training' lesson was when he had been sent into a tomb and had been forced to fight manifestations—light and dark—of his own self. The light could only be hurt by his anger and hate, the dark by his empathy and understanding. It had taken him to a point near death to comprehend that, and he had barely emerged from the tomb alive. But emerge from the barrage of sadistic training lessons he did.
Gone was the shell-of-a-man he was once, the man who didn't care if he lived or died. Like Alema had said, he also wasn't the Valin of old either. Where before he had been a walking ball of anguish, loathing,

and despair, one could barely sense anything from him now. He had learned to draw strength from the very darkness that permeated the planet, learned to shield his emotions but not ignore them. In fact, his feelings were every bit his source of power, fueled his desire to see what he had signed up for through until the end.
Taking in the sight, face covered in the ancient Sith mask and a hooded robe shrouding him, Valin's hardened eyes swept the colonnade and worn tiled floor. "It's a decrepit building one blast shy of collapsing on itself."
"At least Lumiya hasn't changed that part of you," Alema said, rolling her eyes. "Come on, the other adepts are participating in the monthly sparring tournaments."
"The what?"
"It's a monthly tournament. The winners are presented to the full dark Jedi and have a chance at being chosen as an apprentice."
"The losers are killed?"
"Please, we're dark Jedi, not barbarians. It'd be hard for us to rule the galaxy if we kill off our cannon fodder. No, the losers have seriously bruised egos and their hate, shame, or anger drive them to improve themselves for the next tournament. You'll find that once Darth Krayt accepts an adept, only he has a say over whether they are executed or not."
"Nice of him," Valin muttered, their footsteps soft against the aged tile.
"Nah, he's just learned from all the other crazy Sithy people who thought that killing their underlings would be a good idea and then later wondered why they ran out of servants."
"So, how many were you able to bring into the fold? A dozen, two dozen?"
Alema smiled mysteriously. "You remember all those reports your Jedi Order had about those Force-sensitive children identified but no longer present when the recruiting teams went out?"
"Every praxeum had assigned someone to investigate it." Valin paused in his tracks. "Alema, that was well over two hundred missing recruits over the ten-year period."
"Two-hundred and eighty-five if you want to bean-count," Alema said airily. "And that's not mentioning the Force-sensitive children the One Sith identified before the Jedi did. My convincing Krayt to emerge jump-started their recruiting-side of things."
"Alema…how many?"
"Darth Krayt wants to take over the galaxy," Alema said softly. "He needs an army to do it."

She pushed open a pair of massive wooden doors, revealing a cavernous room full of many individuals. Many were sparring, red blades humming and clashing at rhythmic intervals. The crackle of lightning being thrown, the oppressive weight of dark-side techniques being used in combat, the life-forces of so many Force-users radiated outward. "The One Sith is currently training over four-hundred adepts, with another fifty already ready to take on Jedi Knights in combat. Morto, my lovable arch-nemesis, is one of them. Draken, Tandral, Visat, those others you saw your first day here, were some of the other more advanced students. In another year or so, we should have a viable force of close to three-hundred fully trained dark Jedi."
Valin's jaw dropped, though he was saved from embarrassment by his mask. "The Jedi Order, they're in no way ready. They'll be wiped out."
"Pretty much," Alema nodded. "Especially since the bug-war wiped out most of their next-gen Jedi."
"How'd you get so many to agree to join the One Sith?"
"Combination of being very persuasive, Force tricks, and assassinations," Alema answered back. "You'd be surprised at how disillusioned many people are about the Jedi after the decade of instability caused by the bugs."
"Assassinations?"
"Couldn't get it by you, huh? Yeah, in case a family objected but the initiate was willing, we offed the family. Even if the initiate was unwilling, they were sometimes persuaded by the death of everyone they cared for. We then incinerated the bodies and made it look as if the entire family just packed up and left before the Jedi got there."
"You recruited many of them?"
"Part of my role as the Night Herald," Alema confirmed with a nod. "And before you ask, yes I also killed many of their families as well. They were obstacles, loose ends we didn't need. Don't worry, not everyone's family was killed. Just the unwilling ones."
"A lot of them are teens now, so…"
"They're living with the guilt that their refusal to be part of a stronger and more disciplined order led to the deaths of their families," Alema said evenly. "Yes."
"What makes you think they won't betray the One Sith the first chance they get then?"
Alema smirked at Valin. "Because I am wholly clueless as to the repercussions of my actions."
"You deliberately killed their families…made them hate the One Sith… all so they'd betray it later?" Valin did his best not to yell at the insanity of it all, grateful that they had yet to actually step into the

room. Every time he thought he had an angle on the Twi'lek, she did or said something that would once again force him to re-evaluate his opinion of her. Even after a year—ten months full months—of being trained under her guidance.
"You can do great things as a bad person," Alema's smile fell slightly. "When everyone thinks you act in the name of evil, they'll blame all those actions on evil. Some will be repulsed by it. Some…" she gestured to a group of acolytes. "Will embrace it whole-heartedly and even help you kill their families."
There was a sudden flurry of motion, and Valin barely had time to act before a red-bladed weapon hummed through the air on a direct course for Alema. The Twi'lek didn't even blink as she overpowered the thrower and wrenched the twirling air-borne saber from his control. Catching the saber, she deactivated it and flipped it around in her hand.
"Still not strong enough Cinatae," Alema said to a young teen who was glaring at her with undisguised hatred. "And pretty stupid too. Had you killed me, you'd have about a dozen lightsabers sticking out of you."
"I hate you!" The teen snarled, eyes slightly teary.
"Yeah, I know." Alema practically chuckled, her eyes a poisonous yellow. She sauntered over to the teen, everyone else near him taking several steps back as she reactivated his saber. "But so far, that hate isn't enough."
"Go ahead! Kill me! Finish it! You killed everyone else in my family!"
"Nice saber," Alema hefted the weapon and spun it around a couple of times. "For a pre-fab one, that is. But your childhood tantrums and mass-produced saber will never be enough to kill me, Cinatae. Get stronger, make your own saber, then try again."
She handed the acolyte his saber back and turned away from him. With a yell, the acolyte immediately re-activated his blade and charged. Not even looking back, Alema flicked her wrist and sent the young teen flying backwards. "First attempt was free. For that act of stupidness you have refresher cleaning duty for the rest of the week."
Alema continued back to Valin's side, Valin aware that all eyes were following the Twi'lek with varying degrees of emotion. "You killed his family." Valin commented.
"Yup, mother, father, younger brother, wasn't Force-sensitive, and their grandma," Alema answered, everyone slowly returning to their training. "She was a tough old thing."
"You remember that much?"
Alema looked at Valin with a chilling gaze. "I remember *every* life I've taken since joining the One Sith. You better as well."

"Night Herald," a young human woman, svelte and athletic in appearance, approached and fell to one knee before the Twi'lek. She bowed her head so that all Valin could see of her was the single braid of midnight-black hair that ran all the way down to the small of her back.
"Zevia Nist," Alema sighed in turn. "Still insist on kneeling?"
"You are Darth Krayt's Night Herald. The spark that will ignite a wild fire that will consume the galaxy so it can rise from the ashes. You freed me from the family the New Republic had placed me in, enabled me to reclaim my family name and…"
"Yes, yes, yes," Alema looked almost sheepish at Valin. "See, not everyone hates me. Val, meet Zevia Nist, someone on the opposite side of the spectrum as Cinatae."
"And…who is he, my Lady?" The pale-skinned young woman looked over to Valin, as if noticing him from the first time.
"Zevia, meet my apprentice, Valin."
"Your apprentice?" If the woman's blue eyes could grow any wider, they would have popped out. Her exclamation immediately drew the attention of those nearby, their expressions mirroring her own.
"Is there a problem?"
"It is just…in the years you have been here, in all the tournaments, you've never chosen one."
"Jealousy does not become you, acolyte," Alema practically laughed. "If you have chosen him, he must be powerful indeed."
"He's getting there," Alema said, still chuckling. "Now would you get off your knee and stand? Looking down on you when I talk to you puts a crick in my neck all the time."
The dark-haired woman rose, crystal blue eyes gleaming almost fanatically. "As you command."
"Great. Take my apprentice and show him around. Now that he's had his initial training out of the way, he could use someone to show him the sights."
"But…my training? I was to fight in this tournament. This time I'll prove I have what it takes to be a part of your faction."
"Nah, don't bother," Alema said with a dismissive wave. "You can be my second apprentice without wasting your time in the pit."
Valin really wondered about this woman as pure joy flashed across Zevia's face before quickly being schooled back into a neutral expression. "You…you're taking me as your apprentice, my Lady?"
Alema, shared a grin with Valin. "Did I misspeak, Valin?"
"Don't think so."

"I will show him around at once!" Zevia said almost eagerly. "Thank you, Night Herald, you will not regret your choice!"
"Let me talk to him for a moment, you can finish up here and then move your belongings into the Tomb of…"
"Ajunta Pall, yes, Night Herald. I know the place your faction was given residence." Zevia said quickly, eyes bright. "I'll move my belongings now."
The young woman performed a quick bow, then took off.
"It looks like you just made her year," Valin commented with mild amusement.
"What do you think of her?" Alema said casually, gesturing for Valin to continue walking with her through the room. Gradually, everyone again returned to their duties, though more than a few eyed them as they passed by.
"A bit unbalanced," Valin said neutrally. "Please tell me that sycophant thing was an act."
"Sadly, no," Alema flashed him a small grin. "She was one of the first I had the pleasure of bringing here. Her biological dad had been some big dark Jedi hotshot back in the Empire days; mom one of that guy's conquests. Dad was killed before she was born, mom shortly after. The New Republic placed her in a foster family."
"Let me guess, you killed her foster parents."
"You have such a high opinion of me."
"You seem to be willing to kill anyone that doesn't advance your agenda," Valin pointed out.
"Killing her family would have brought too much attention, given who she is and the fact that her adoptive father was a planetary senator and mother a local governor. We simply had her vanish one day, with no one the wiser."
"And you chose her as your second apprentice, because…?"
"A gift for you," Alema answered absently. "I figured you could use a sparring partner…and some companionship. She's broken just enough for you to make her better…or worse, depending on what you want her to be. Since she was a kid, her dark Jedi dad was whispering to her in her sleep from half-way beyond the grave. I had to send him the rest of the way when he tried to take over her body. She'll do anything for me if I ask."
Valin stopped in his tracks. "I don't need…"
"Yes, you do. You need someone to remind you that you're still human, still have boundaries you won't cross. That sure as heck isn't going to be me or Lumiya. I brought you here to learn the 'dark' side of the Force, not become a drooling red-bladed fanatic. Zevia will be your

Quor'sav in a coalmine if you will. You start going down the drooling fanatic route, she will too. You already see how she reacts to me and what that says about my red-saber waving days."
"Doesn't she have a say in this?"
"Nope," Alema said. "She doesn't obey me, she returns to the academy to await selection or graduation into the ranks of the cannon fodder."
"Like me, you're using her."
"Yup, a means to an end," Alema said truthfully.
Valin took that with an accepting nod. He understood that Alema wasn't a nice person. Had done so many evil things in the name of 'good' to rightly deserve the list of deathmarks she had. Had long accepted that Korriban would be his home for the near future. This was just another aspect, another twist that the corrupted nature of the planet had thrown his way. "So, what now?"
Alema gestured to the hundreds of acolytes going through their training. The humming of lightsabers, the yells and battle cries, the pinging of remote-fired blaster bolts deflecting off sabers, the atmosphere was that of a military academy. "Pick a group, challenge them, join them. Have fun. For the next few years, they will all become like family."
"Family." Valin repeated, peering through the slot of his mask and surveying the room.
"Love 'em, hate 'em, that's your choice. But every single one of them is Force-sensitive, and most will kill you if you get on their bad side. On the flip side, earn their loyalty and you can have them do things they might not ordinarily would. This is the life you've chosen, my apprentice. Make the most out of it, and one day we'll be in a position to save the galaxy."
0-o-V-o-0
"The time to act draws near," Darth Wyyrlock announced, standing next to Darth Krayt at the head of the rectangular table. "With the Jedi Order becoming fully integrated into the Galactic Alliance, it will not be long until they are strong once more. Therefore we must begin preparations to launch an all-out assault by year's end."
"*I concur*," Lady Brood said. "*We have waited long enough, now is the time to act.*"
"*With the Queen Mother returning, Hapes will grow stronger as well*," Kyrisa hissed.
"And I say we wait," Alema was reclined in the stone chair, feet resting on the stone table.
"Oh?" Krayt looked in amusement at the Twi'lek. "You do now? And what, pray tell, is your reasoning this time? You first advocate that we

strike, but when the issue comes up, for the past three times, you have had us hold off."
"Good thing I did too, otherwise we'd have been in that whole Killik mess with the rest of the galaxy," Alema said.
Namman Cha, spoke next. "*The Jedi have never been weaker thanks to the Solo family getting so many killed in the war. The galactic government is undergoing a transitional period, instability rife*."
"And we pop up now, we give that government a target to rally around," Alema answered back. "Yes the Jedi Order is weakened, but the Solos are stronger than ever, even have governmental positions now. If they could bring down entire Vong fleet groups with just themselves and a rag-tag group of ships, imagine the damage they could do with the galactic government at their fingertips."
"*If we allow them to remain in control, they could use that power to strengthen the government*," The half-cyborg Namman Cha argued back.
"Or let politics drown them," Lumiya spoke up from behind Alema. "Just as we have done for so many governments, we turn public opinion against them. We get them to step down so that their influence and power will be limited."
Danaan Kerr, the deranged Lord of Ternaax, cackled and nodded. "*That does make sense. A Solo depowered is one we won't have to worry about when we attack*."
"*Plus, we still have the majority of the Jedi Knights and Masters spread throughout the galaxy,"* Lord Cronal commented, his hologram appearing as a shrouded person made up of stars and galaxies. *"It is better to wait until they are in one location and fell them all at once. We all saw how unsuccessful Palpatine was in rooting out the survivors of his purge*."
"Outvoted again, Wyyrloc," Alema said flippantly.
The Chagarin glared. "You are not so indispensable as you might think. Therefore you should watch yourself, Night Herald."
"Enough," Darth Krayt rose from his chair, and the others fell silent, their holograms flickering in the dim lighting of the chamber. "Whether we attack at the end of this year, or in ten or even a hundred years will mean nothing if our forces are not prepared."
"*Dread Lord, my forces have secured Zonama.*" The flickering image of Yuuzhan Vong dark sider Vongerella spoke up assuredly. "*As we speak, the Slayers continue to whisper to the slumbering Sekot, turning her to our views. My legions grow by the day, and the resistance put up by the natives falters. You have but give the word and my forces will return and avenge Onimi."*

"*Both the Grand Moff and Admiral Daala have paved the way for my return as well. They simply await your word,"* Lord Cronal added. "*The mercenaries are still on the fence, but I have no doubt we can persuade them to join our cause.*"
"*I have received assurances from Houses Gheer and Galney that their forces can move against the Queen Mother at a moment's notice,"* Kyrisa confirmed. "*And the Night-clans you evacuated from Dathomir have all seen the error of their ways and have given me their complete loyalty.*"
"*My own contacts have fully infiltrated the Corellian government. To truly kick the legs out from under the pathetic Galactic Alliance, all you have to do is command it and Corellia will have new leadership favorable to your rule, my Lord,*" Lord Namman Cha concurred reluctantly.
"*And we are prepared to release the Sithspawn viruses on the heavily populated centers of over a dozen Core-worlds,"* Lord Ternaax said gleefully. "*I just can't wait to see the effects on the Jedi-loving cities."*
"My own brood is eager for blood," Lady Brood spoke evenly, her dark-side wrinkled face twisting with hate. "*And I am eager for revenge*."
"Great, we're all raring to go," Alema said. "But right now we only have fifty or so acolytes ready to take on the Jedi. In five, ten years, we'll have hundreds. We'll only get one shot at this, so let's not blow it by attacking too early."
Darth Krayt nodded once, standing to his full height in his vonduun crab armor. His face, deeply tanned and worn like the cliff-face in a desert, radiated a sadistic satisfaction. "And I am in agreement. With our forces ready now, they can only grow stronger with time. Keep our agents in place, continue to sow discord and darkness. When the time comes, no one will be able to stop us. When the time comes, the Sith shall return to the galaxy and then there truly will be a millennium of peace."
0-o-Epilogue End!-o-0
A\N: Yes! It's finally over! Done, finished, no more bugs! Leave a review if you would like, they're greatly appreciated. You might even find yourself as an anagrammed-OC in my next story…though my OCs do tend to die so sorry in advance =).
Now on to the sneak peek for what's in store for part 2 of the trilogy!
Sneaky Peek 1
Taryn kept a casual watch as Cassa, Allana, and Jayce played in the fresh snow in the back garden of the Royal Winter Retreat, accepting a steaming cup of cocoa from her husband, and leaned back against

him. "It's so unfair how you Jedi can run around barefoot in the snow and I need three layers to keep from freezing my butt off."
"Normally I would have a witty remark for that," Zekk kissed the top of Taryn's head. "But we're next to a bunch of Force-sensitive kids who'd hear anything I whispered."
"You can whisper it to me later then," Taryn quipped with a grin. They watched the young Solos play for a few more minutes, enjoying the serenity of the morning. Looking back over her shoulder to Zekk, Taryn lightly pressed her cheek to his shoulder. "When do you want to have a few little ones of our own, Zekk?"
"Daughters?" Zekk murmured.
"Daughters, sons, doesn't matter to me," Taryn murmured back. She glanced back at the frolicking children with a whimsical smile. "They'll be our kids, so the other nobles will just have to deal with it."
"Things have been peaceful recently," Zekk said thoughtfully. "Stable enough to start a family. I'm game if you are."
Taryn grinned broadly, setting down her drink to wrap her arms around her husband. "Always ready for whatever the galaxy throws my way."
"Later tonight then," Zekk murmured, kissing Taryn's neck. "I've always wanted a family of my own."
Just as Taryn was about to enjoy his affections, her grin promptly fell away as her commando-trained instincts picked up on a faint movement through the frost-ivy covered gates. She placed a hand on his chest, a hand drifting down to her blaster.
He picked up her change in mood and looked the direction she was gazing in. "Taryn?"
"I…I thought I saw something," Taryn frowned. She pulled out her comlink. "Southern security team, report in."
"*Team One, all clear, sir*," a female voice came back over the comm.
"*Team Two, no problems*," another agreed.
Taryn was about to lower her comlink, but then thought better of it. "Teams One and Two, please relay your security code. Counter-sign Rainbow Gem."
At that, nothing but silence answered Taryn.
"I'm not sensing anything out of place," Zekk frowned, but he was reaching for his lightsaber nonetheless.
"Hey kids, play time's over," Taryn called out. "Come back inside."
"Awww, do we have to?" Allana whined.
"Yes," Taryn said, keeping a smile on her face despite the situation. "You…"

Two things happened at once. A red blade seemed to appear out of thin air and fly straight towards Allana's small form, and Zekk's own red saber flew out and knocked it aside.
"Get inside!" Taryn yelled.
Zekk leaped from the doorway, through the light snowfall, and landed between the children and the direction the saber had come from. A wide-eyed Cassa, Jayce, and Allana scrambled through the torso-high snowbanks towards Taryn, an inch away from panic.
"This is Captain Zel to Security Room, put the estate on lockdown! The *chume'da* is under attack! Security Room, come in!"
Just then, two figures, moving like wraiths, leaped over the garden wall. They were completely covered in black cloth, wearing no armor at all and carrying no blasters, but the red-lightsabers they wielded were a more reliable indicator of their abilities. Both held two, the blades shining a red glow in the snow before them.
"Auntie Taryn, behind you!" Allana screamed.
Taryn whirled around only to be tackled hard, the wind leaving her as she was driven back into a duracrete wall. She struggled to regain the initiative, but her assailant slammed her against the wall again, and this time she saw stars. Hands gripped tightly around her neck, lifting her dazed figure off the ground.
Before she lost consciousness though, her assailant hissed in pain and released his hold on her. An amphistaff was sticking out of his stomach, its venom already fast at work. Almost in disbelief he followed the amphistaff to its holder, a determined and fiercely green-eyed Cassa.
"I won't let you hurt her," Cassa growled. She then looked to her amphistaff and praised it. "*Tu'q, Sa'il. Do-ro'ik Hapes pratte!*"
Her assailant wasn't so easily beaten, however. With a snarl he gestured and an invisible, sledgehammer-like force slammed into Cassa and sent her small form flying through the air. He yanked the amphistaff from his body and threw it to the side, quickly spinning back to Taryn as she fired off several shots from her blaster. At point-blank range, it was hard to miss. Even when an invisible force snapped the bones in her wrist, Taryn ignored the blinding pain and continued to pump the assailant with blaster-bolts. Just when it looked as if the man wouldn't go down, a flash of light from the top-most part of the estate turned his head into a liquefied mess.
"Thanks, Hiana," Taryn panted, cradling her injured hand. The sound of lightsabers clashing, however, quickly drew her attention elsewhere. Zekk was in the middle of a fierce fight against two very nimble opponents, his Jedi robes billowing in the arctic breeze. One attacker

would engage with lightsabers, and the other would fire lightning at Zekk's opposite side, but he was holding his own. The snow flurried around them, looking like molten lava in the glow of their red blades. Then the two switched up strategies, and Zekk was forced to battle against four different lightsaber blades. He was pushed onto the defensive, his motions becoming rigid as they began to restrict his options. Hiana's sniper rifle flashed again, but this time the assassin dodged it. The assassin then proceeded to rake Hiana's perch with a long-distance blast of purple lightning. The wooden roof burst into flame after a second of contact, turning the top of the estate into a blaze another moment later.

Zekk took that opportunity, however, to halve his odds. Using a blast of Force energy to send one of the assailants flying into a nearby tree, he whirled about and plunged his lightsaber into the distracted Force-lightning user from behind. The first attacker sprung back into battle a second too late. Zekk parried the flurry of attacks, then elbowed his attacker in the chin before delivering the finishing blow to his stunned opponent. Even with the attacker falling to the ground, however, Zekk didn't deactivate his lightsaber. His gaze was instead directed outward, the Force no longer shrouding the surroundings.

Kneeling beside an unconscious Cassa, it was only then that Taryn realized how much trouble they were in. The trio of Force-using assassins were just the advanced guard. The weather chose that moment to clear a bit, the morning fog lifting ever so slightly. Just outside the wall, she could see several squads of black-clad individuals lining up shots down the barrel of blaster-rifles. Quickly pulling Allana and Jayce behind her, Taryn dropped to the ground as low as she could.

A deafening volley of blaster fire cut through the crystalline fence that ringed the garden. Dozens of red lasers burning holes into the estate's exterior. A second and third volley followed, the estate wall crumpling under the continuous barrage.

Zekk and his lightsaber made easy targets, and he sprinted away from Taryn's prone form to draw some of the fire off of her position. Not that it mattered with the dozens of other attackers still bombarding the area with everything they had.

A frag grenade landed next to Taryn, who quickly picked it up and lobbed it back in the direction it had come. She pulled the unconscious Cassa behind a snowbank, taking with her the two other terrified children in the process.

Jacye and Allana were clinging to Taryn in abject fear as the evil intentions of their attackers became clear to their Force-sensitive minds.
"Stay down, stay here," Taryn whispered gently, switching her blaster to her other hand. "I'll keep you safe, promise."
Another red-lightsaber burst through the snowbank, but Taryn rolled to the side at the last moment and the red blade narrowly missed her. Before it could return to its sender, Taryn targeted the only unarmed person in the line of attackers and drilled him with two precision shots between his eyes. The red-lightsaber, which had been on a return trip, fell to the snowy ground next to Taryn with a sedate plop. She quickly grabbed the saber and attached it to her utility belt. Though she might not be able to fight with one, she had learned at a young age that a lightsaber was a very handy can, door, and vehicle opener.
The blaster-fire picked up again, and Taryn pressed herself back to the ground. The odds were not looking good….
Sneaky Peek 2
Jedi Knight Jysella Horn briefly wondered if her day could get any worse. Waking up late for an important meeting with the Corellian Senate, she had spilled hot caff on her robes on the trip over. Only to learn that the meeting had been rescheduled earlier that morning for some distant date. She then discovered that the Corellian government was once again slashing the budget for the Corellian Praxeum. The Corellian government had been decidedly anti-Jedi ever since the Swarm War—though the Jedi *were* indirectly responsible for the loss of a good portion of Corellia's military capabilities during said war. Lastly, she just discovered that she hadn't passed her trials for Jedi Master. 'Too young' the masters had called her. 'Impatient' was another word she remembered.
Ever since her brother had died during the Swarm War, Jysella had pushed herself hard to be the best Jedi she could be. She had to be Jedi enough for both Valin and her, but evidently, seven years of hard work was not enough. Seven years of helping the helpless, bringing peace to the ungrateful, and otherwise trying to be a Jedi in an increasingly hostile Corellian climate. Frustration was something she was becoming very familiar with. In fact, if her dad wasn't the leader of the Corellian Praxeum, she would have considered quitting all together.
With everything piled on, Jysella couldn't possibly fathom how her current day could become any worse.
And then it did.
"Jedi Knight Horn!" A panicked voice called out, followed by footsteps hastily running through the hall. "Jedi Knight Horn!"

"What?" Jysella sighed, rubbing her forehead. "Does another refugee group need relocating?"
"Jedi Knight Horn!" The Corellian Jedi Apprentice scrambled into Jysella's office, panting as he did. "Trouble! The Corellian Defense Force has declared the Praxeum an illegal military institution and are marching on us!"
"What?!" Jysella stood, her eyes darting to her window.
"Head of State Denjax Teppler was deposed as well! It's why this morning's senate meeting was canceled."
"What?" Jysella repeated again. "Who's in charge then?"
The apprentice grabbed the HoloNet control and turned on the monitor. Jysella's jaw dropped, her hands fell limply to her side.
"...*and I, Thrackan Sal-Solo, promise to reverse the trend of decline that these so-called Corellian Jedi have inflicted on our great peoples! As I speak, the Corellian Defense Force and a special group of concerned citizens are rounding up the Jedi to execute them for treason. Just as I promised all of you loyal followers at that farce of a trial over a dozen years ago. I'm back. Back and here to clean up our planet of the weakness that has taken root.*"
Jysella looked out the window, her eyes bulging at the sight of hover-tanks and legions of soldiers marching down the main road to the still yet-to-be-completed Jedi Praxeum. But then she narrowed her gaze at the group of individuals leading the military. The 'concerned citizens' or so Thrackan had called them, were Force-sensitive.
Two figures were at the forefront of the entire group, both masked and hooded, but obviously male and female. Humanoid male and Twi'lek female. The male waved a finger in the air in a circular motion. Before Jysella could think of anything else, the hovertanks opened fire. Windows blew out, walls crumpled. There was a deafening rumble again, and the entire building shook.
"We need to get to the landing bay," Jysella hissed. "No way can we fight all of them."
But that option was made a lot more difficult a second later when Corellian Chase-X's roared by, quad-laser cannons blasting off the green mirrored jewel at the top of the building in a definitive statement.
"What are we going to do?" the apprentice said in panic.
"Well, we run or die," Jysella said tersely, gesturing for the teen to follow her. "If the entire planet wants us dead, then that's all we can do."
"But we're Jedi. We've been helping them for the past ten years!"

"And evidently they don't need us anymore," Jysella replied as the building shook from another bombardment. She made a gesture as several more frightened apprentices joined her. "Life is never fair."
They rounded the corner and saw a squad of Defense Force commandos at the opposite end. Both Jysella and the commandos readied their weapons at the same time. Her yellow lightsaber hummed as it deflected the laser bolts, and when a few seconds passed, the squad of commandos was dead on the floor from their own projectiles.
"Keep moving," Jysella said dispassionately.
When they reached the hangar bay, the escape by ship went from difficult to impossible. The commandos had destroyed all the vessels sitting in the hangar, and there were three other commando squads present with weapons raised.
"Surrender, Jedi," the lead commando ordered, voice mechanical in nature because of his helmet.
Red lightsabers lit up and three of the black-dressed, hooded and masked people Jysella had seen outside emerged from the ranks of the commandos.
"Don't bother, captain," one of the three dark Jedi said lazily. "We got this. If you want you can blast the brats later."
"Darth Moderus said that we weren't going to kill kids," the commando protested.
"Very well, then we'll finish off the apprentices after we deal with her," the dark Jedi said dismissively.
Jysella held out her hands to either side of her and addressed the apprentices. "Stay back."
"We can fight."
"I said, stay back," Jysella repeated, holding up her lightsaber. She pressed a second button and a second yellow beam of light emerged from her saber-staff. "This will be over quickly.
Jysella went on the offensive, her saberstaff twirling about in her hands with a deadly hum. Her body whipped about, avoiding the thrusts and slashes of her opponents, her feet constantly in motion. An over-the-shoulder block turned into a sweeping attack. The three dark Jedi were forced back slowly but surely. Her saber whooshed and buzzed, slicing off the sleeve of one of the dark Jedi, scorching the cheek of another. Throughout it all Jysella remained unscathed. She might not have been made Jedi Master, but she had made damned sure she was on the same combat-level as one. Then again, the three she was up against weren't the best bladesmen she had faced either.

Then, the three dark Jedi attacked in perfect unison, two trying to tie up her blades while the third went in for the kill. Only, the third was suddenly blasted with a ball of Force energy and rebounded painfully off the smoldering wreck of one of the ships.
"Mind if we even the odds a bit?" Falleen Jedi Knight Natua Wan asked with her usual detachment, dropping down from a hole in the ceiling.
A second dark Jedi was sent flying in another direction as Natua's Selonian apprentice Shrona dropped down from another hole in the ceiling. Now a teenager, the lithe polecat form of Natua's apprentice radiated a silent fury at having her home attacked.
"Let's finish this up then," Jysella said, taking advantage of their arrival to skewer her surprised opponent.
The commandos seemed to remember that they had guns in their hands and frantically brought them up to bear. Even heavily armed and armored, they were no match for the three Jedi that quickly carved through their ranks.
"Great, now we still need a ship," Shrona commented simply, pushing the last commando off of her sky-blue saber. Several more younger apprentices dropped through the hole Shrona had come through to join the survivors. Even then the building continued to boom and shake from constant bombardment. "And fast."
"And the Force has provided one for us," Natua pointed out the open bay.
A civilian transport appeared to be defying all odds and was weaving around the laser fire of several Chase-X's in pursuit.
"Everyone get ready to jump!" Jysella yelled out in warning.
The transport swung by, side-door open. The two-dozen Jedi leaped in unison, tumbling into the hold as the door slammed shut and the ship rocketed away. From the viewport, the Jedi could only watch in disbelief as the building they had spent the better part of a decade in crumbled under the barrage.
"What happens now?" Asked one of the apprentices in a hushed voice.
"Now we continue to live, to learn, and take strength and comfort in the fact that we have survived this day," Natua answered, knowing that Jysella would be distracted due to their rescuer.
"Tarc," Jysella managed at the door of the cockpit, staring in disbelief at the pilot.
"Jedi Horn," Tarc replied without any warmth.
"Guess I deserved that."
"Mind strapping in to the co-pilot seat? I think some of those Chase-X's in pursuit have Jedi pilots. We're not going to last much longer up here."

Of course, Jysella's day happened to get much worse. A missile fired by one of the fighters impacted with the side of the ship. Military ordnance versus civilian manufactured taxi wasn't exactly a fair match up.
"Blast it!" Tarc groaned over the smoke and blaring alarms. "We're going down!"
For those on the ground, all they could see was the flaming ship careen off several buildings before disappearing into the forests just outside the capital in a blinding fireball.
Back in front of the Praxeum, the attack had been halted.
"Darth Moderus," a masked figure knelt in front of the attacking force's leader. "The building has been cleared. All survivors are now in our custody."
"And what of Jedi Master Horn?" Darth Moderus said without emotion. The flames of the burning Praxeum reflected off the glossy ebony mask he wore. Carved to resemble someone who's mouth and eyes had been sewn shut, the mask was just as expressionless as his voice. "I left instructions for him to be left alive so he can be made an example of. Were your people up to the task Lord Saedis?"
"He chose to fight, my lord, killed eight of our initiates before we subdued him."
"And Corellian casualties?"
"Nearly a hundred were lost sir. Close to fifty were in the advance team by the landing bay, including three more initiates."
"The Jedi?"
"Eight Green Knights were killed in the fighting. But we've secured twenty of the apprentices."
"This Praxeum had nearly twice that in apprentices."
"The ship that eluded our fighters…"
"The aerial assault was your responsibility, *Lord*. Let us hope your successor does better." Darth Moderus ended the report by skewering the man's bowed head with a blood-red saber.
The others shifted nervously, knowing full well their commander had a reputation for punishing failure and rewarding success. He also wasn't too discriminatory in that respect, considering the fact that the man he had just executed had been a fellow dark Jedi,
"Secure all Jedi! I don't want any more slip-ups," Darth Moderus barked. "When High Master Namman Cha returns from Coruscant, I want the Sith Praxeum of Corellia fully up and running."
"Sir!"
The remaining lightsaber-wielding attackers hurried off to do his bidding.

"See? Wasn't that fun?" Darth Moderus' until then silent companion said lightly. "You got to kill a very bad man, a Sith Lord, in front of an army of dark Jedi and no one cared. Could never have done that as a Jedi. You felt their fear, didn't you?"
Moderus ignored her. "My sister?"
"I had the charter request put in to DonoSlane Excursions. I assume that was the crazy pilot who braved the squad of Defense Force fighters. Now the question is, what are you going to do about your father?"
"I'll let you handle him, Alema," Valin said evenly, removing his mask to let the cool Corellian air wash over his pale face. "I have to give you some fun after all."
"So kind of you, my apprentice."
"I have to make up an excuse for Namman when he gets back from Coruscant. I doubt he'd accept the fact that Saedis' incompetence allowed half the population of the Praxeum to escape."
"You're good at thinking on your feet, Darth Moderus. I'm sure you'll come up with something," Alema retorted, slinking off towards the burning entrance of the building. "Aren't you glad the long game is finally paying off?"
"Not glad," Valin replaced his mask, and with it his air of indifferent cruelty. "But relieved. Sooner or later, this will all be over."
End of Sneak Peak